Funding the Future

Badenoch’s performative cruelty

Published: November 17, 2026, 7:02 am

Is Britain’s welfare bill really out of control? Kemi Badenoch wants to cut £36 billion from annual social security spending, with disabled people and low-income families among those most affected.

But does the evidence actually justify these cuts?

In this video, I examine Britain’s social security spending and explain why I believe Badenoch’s proposals represent a political attack on vulnerable people rather than a serious solution to Britain’s economic problems.

The figures tell a different story from the one we’re being told.

Social security spending was just 10.4% of GDP in 2024/25, compared with 12% in 2012/13. It also accounts for a smaller proportion of government expenditure than it did in the 1990s.

Nearly half of social security spending supports pensioners, while unemployment benefits account for a tiny proportion of the total.

In this video, I also explain why disability-related spending has increased and how changes in Britain’s workplaces are making employment increasingly inaccessible to people with disabilities.

People want to work, but employers are removing the flexibility that many disabled and neurodivergent workers need.

Cutting benefits will not solve these problems. Instead, it risks increasing poverty, financial insecurity and the demand for unpaid care.

I argue that Britain needs a politics of care, not further cuts to essential support. That means investing in healthcare, accessible employment, workplace adjustments and financial security for those who cannot work.

The real question is whether we want a society that punishes people for needing support or one that gives everyone the opportunity to flourish.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2gOuMsXrBSU?si=o_VqYxAKr2uArKiA

This is the audio version:

https://www.podbean.com/player-v2/?i=cnz7h-1bb28c3-pb&from=pb6admin&share=1&download=1&rtl=0&fonts=Arial&skin=f6f6f6&font-color=auto&logo_link=episode_page&btn-skin=c73a3a

This is the transcript:

Is Britain’s welfare bill out of control? If you listen to Kemi Badenoch, the leader of the Conservative Party, she says it is, and she wants to cut £36 billion of annual social security expenditure in the UK. Disabled people are high on her list of targets, but what does the evidence actually show? Is Britain’s real problem a crisis of care? Or is Kemi Badenoch engaged in performative cruelty, which is what I’m going to suggest in this video?

The figures say there is no crisis with our social security costs in this country. Social security spending is not historically exceptional, and cash figures conceal what is really happening because they ignore the impact of inflation. Whilst we must compare current spending with past trends, shares of government spending and national income, and Badenoch is ignoring all of these points when coming up with her claims.

The evidence challenges her entire economic narrative. And that is why I think it is performative cruelty that she’s offering, not a serious political programme from a party that thinks it will ever have power again.

So what is she actually saying? She says she wants to cut £36 billion in annual social security costs. She knows she cannot go for pensions, which represent half of that cost. So £13.7 billion of these savings supposedly come from sickness and disability benefits. Another £9.5 billion comes from restricting migrants’ benefit entitlements. And £3.1 billion comes from reinstating the two-child limit on benefits. That is punishing innocent children. And there are other cuts affecting disabled children, as if punishing a child for being third in the family isn’t enough, and for other claimants as well.

I stress, these are Conservative figures. They're not verified savings. And the Institute for Fiscal Studies has already said, and I agree with them, that they think these are just political make-believe. That's my term, not theirs, but I think we're on the same wavelength.

So let's look at the evidence. Historical evidence contradicts the claim that we have unprecedented spending. Social security costs in 2024/25 were just 10.4% of GDP in the UK. It reached 12% in 2012/13, which was of course under a Tory government. It represents 23.6% of government spending now. The proportion was 28.1% in 1996/97, which was of course under a Tory government.

Today's spending is not then historically unprecedented, nor is it rising in a way that indicates it's out of control, although pension costs will rise, as we always knew. There are more people with grey hair. That's a fact. We can't avoid it.

So where does the money actually go? Pensions and pensioners' support account for 47% of the total right now. That's near enough half. Unemployment benefits, in contrast, cost just £1 in every £1,000 spent in the UK. The amount of money spent on unemployment benefits is now so insignificant it couldn't be cut anymore. The figure was 1.4% in 1984/85, and let me stress that was under a Tory government.

Support for children and low-paid families has fallen.

Just look at this chart: this is a table of the breakdown of all the major types of social security expenditure from just after the Second World War to date. And what it shows, and this is all government data, is that pension costs have risen because, as I've already said, there are more people with hair like mine and the cost of disability has risen, and I'll come back to that. But everything else is basically flatlining or falling.

Children and low-paid families have already seen massive cuts in the amount of benefits they receive, and unemployment benefits have become so low, it's almost impossible to detect them on the chart. Whilst other low-income support is low and declining. This is the reality of social security spending today. It's not out of control. If anything, it's decidedly mean.

So let's talk about what this means. Disability does not mean inability. Now, I agree with Kemi Badenoch when she said that. She's right that people who have a disability are able to do things. But to claim, as she did, that double amputees run marathons and therefore imply that anyone who's a double amputee can do that is quite ridiculous. Most two-legged people cannot run marathons, and I wouldn't suggest that they should.

She also says that autistic people run major companies, but that ignores the extraordinary difficulties they may well have had to overcome to get there, and that needs in this area vary enormously. Individual achievements don't, in other words,

prove anything very much. Disability creates different needs for different people.

There’s a phrase in the autistic community that when you’ve met one autistic person, you’ve met one autistic person. You can’t then presume that every other autistic person is the same, and that’s true for almost every disability that you can name. And as a matter of fact, working does not eliminate disability-related costs. In fact, they may increase, because people have got to get to work and that may require support, and it’s exactly that type of expenditure that Kemi Badenoch seems so keen to axe.

So why has disability spending increased? There are factors to consider here, and Badenoch is ignoring the important ones, almost all of which are systemic.

More people do now need support with their health. Our economy is often excluding disabled people, and that is the cause of the problem we are facing. Suitable employment opportunities for people with disabilities are disappearing, and this is for good reason. The workplace is getting very much harder for very many people. We’ve recently done a video on this. We looked at the Social Attitude Survey and people’s attitudes towards work and how work has changed. And one of the big changes is absolutely critical here.

In the late 1980s, over 60% of people had a choice in the workplace as to how they did their job. In other words, their bosses did not micromanage them. They could have flexibility about how they achieved the goal. It was up to them to work out how to deliver what was expected of them, and so they could build the job around their strengths and weaknesses.

That’s not the case anymore. 70% of all jobs are now routinised. In other words, routine dominates. They’re told what to do, when to do it, how to do it, and there is no flexibility. Adaptation has been taken out of the workplace, and that means that people with disabilities, which requires, by definition, the ability to adapt to circumstances, have been denied the opportunity to work.

The number of jobs that are now available, where a person can adapt the routine of the workplace to suit their needs and still meet the needs of their managers, has declined by more than 50% since 1990. That is the cause of the problems that we have in our society. People want to work. Work is not available in the way that they need it, and Badenoch is, as a result, looking in the wrong place for solutions.

We haven’t got more disabled people necessarily. We haven’t got more autistic people. We haven’t got more people with ADHD. They always existed. But the fact is the world could accommodate them, and now neoliberal business, which requires people to be uniform in their approach to work, cannot accommodate those people. That is the difficulty.

But Badenoch still wants to cut costs. She says that people must work, but she isn’t

looking to increase workplace flexibility, and that is where the solution lies. Instead, she's insisting on cuts, and cuts have consequences for real people. Some households will lose essential financial support. They will not be able to meet their needs. And remember, 20% of households in the UK are already in absolute poverty. They cannot meet their essential costs every month.

Another 20% only just survive. And as a consequence, people and innocent children will be punished by what she's proposing. And any child who's not 'normal' will be blighted if she removes her support for children who need help. That is what she's going to do.

Poverty and insecurity could increase.

Employment cannot be created by financial punishment.

And if those who have their benefits withdrawn, meaning that they cannot buy the help that they need, still need it, other people will have to give up their jobs to care for them.

Unmet needs may increase other public costs as a result. Government savings are not necessarily economic savings, but that is a point that neoliberal thinking of the sort that Kemi Badenoch uses does not recognise.

So what would a caring government do? Would they do the performative cruelty, which is very clearly the agenda that Kemi Badenoch is promoting? They would not, of course. They would start with people's needs. They would invest in healthcare and accessible public services. They would make employment genuinely accessible to disabled people. They would adapt workplaces. They would change lighting. They would change noise in the workplace. They would adapt the workplace so that people could work away from direct instruction and still have the flexibility to deliver. They would allow people to work at home. But all these trends are being ignored. Instead, the return to work and working in a routine way is now what is being demanded.

The government should be changing that, and it should be providing training, adjustments and appropriate employment support and funding for them.

The whole goal will be to support and protect incomes when people cannot work, whilst providing them with the flexible opportunity to do so. This is what we need to do. This is a genuine measure which can be put in place to increase well-being. Cutting benefits does the opposite, and this is at the core of the care crisis we really have.

Our social security spending is not unprecedented. Badenoch is proposing cuts without identifying underlying needs. She's doing so with the deliberate intent of promoting otherness, victim-blaming, and performative cruelty, and no one should be doing that in an ethical political system. This is the opposite of care. The government should enable people to fulfil their potential. The fact that it isn't is what the care crisis is. We need

more care. We don’t need cuts, and we definitely do not want cruelty.

So the question is, what sort of society do you want? Do you want one that punishes people because they have a disability, or do you want one where everyone has the chance to flourish? And remember, someone you know has a disability, and they might be affected by what Kemi Badenoch is proposing.

There’s a poll down below. Let us have your comments.

Poll

[poll id="589"]