

Opinion Conservatives

@zoewilliams
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3,547 817

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It's true: Conservative governments really do kill people
Zoe Williams



The claim is not hysterical: from health to disability benefits to prisons, it's clear that Tory policies cost lives



A protest outside Kentish Town Jobcentre, north London, about people who have died as a result of benefit cuts. Photograph: Alamy Stock Photo

There was a splenetic exchange on BBC Question Time last week, between an audience member and my colleague, Aditya Chakraborty, who had pointed out that disabled people had died as a result of cuts to social security. You're like "Donald Trump", said a guy in the audience: the parallel was, Aditya had made a statement that was stirring, powerful, emotive and trenchant – so I guess, if we leave aside the fact that it was also true, it was pretty Trumpian.

Just as it's verboten to call someone a liar in parliament, so there is a curious and ancient disapproval around pointing out that a state has been the direct cause of any deaths, whether of its own citizens or abroad. It is taken as hysterical overstatement (something that should only be levelled at an authoritarian regime, which takes its people out and shoots them) and pitiful naivety (a wilful misunderstanding of the business of government, to trace its policies crudely back to the lives of those who are affected by them).

Since "hysterical" and "naive" are two of the deadliest charges in political discourse, one always checks oneself before going full-pelt: we know that 90 people a month die after being declared fit for work, but can we really lay those deaths at the government's feet? Plainly, they might have died anyway. All we can say about the Conservatives is that they instituted a disability assessment system that makes bad decisions, repeatedly, and causes untold trauma and desperation to people who are on the brink of death.

So let's refine it: we know of the existence of 49 Department for Work and Pension reports – called peer reviews – that are triggered when someone dies following a cut to their benefits, 40 of which were suicides. They are heavily redacted, and what we can read of them does not amount to a straight causal link between a cut or sanction and a suicide.

The government – which will casually spend hundreds of thousands of pounds fighting a freedom of information request to release these peer reviews, and yet cannot afford to support a terminally ill cancer patient – has upended priorities when it comes to discussing the deaths of its citizens. It ploughs all its energy into denying a link between destitution and desperation, and apparently no energy at all into asking why these suicides occurred.

A much more striking example of that came in 2015, when there were 30,000 "excess deaths" in England and Wales, the greatest rise in mortality for 50 years, according to a study published this year. The researchers – from Oxford University, the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, and two borough councils – examined possible explanations and, having rejected environmental collapse, natural disaster and war, concluded that "the evidence points to a major failure of the health system, possibly exacerbated by failings in social care", adding for clarity: "The impact of cuts resulting from the imposition of austerity on the NHS has been profound."

An unnamed Department of Health spokesman rejected the claim, citing "personal bias" of the authors (the truth has a liberal bias, as the saying goes), but strikingly, took no further interest in the matter. You would think that, even if someone vigorously denied responsibility for 30,000 excess deaths, they would at least ask where, then, responsibility lay.

Last year, meanwhile, the suicide rate within prisons in England and Wales reached an all-time high: 119 deaths, or one every three days. The background is a 40% drop in the number of prison officers, which had an obvious practical impact, pinpointed by Prof Pamela Taylor of the Royal College of Psychiatrists: there simply weren't enough staff to accompany mentally ill patients to clinics and appointments.

But understaffing in prisons has much more profound atmospheric affects: it erodes officers' capability to observe prisoners closely; to support those suffering a decline; to control bullies and legal highs; and to perform the subtle, invaluable, life-changing business of jail craft. Only a government with no insight at all into the prison estate would think you could shred its staff by nearly half and suffer no catastrophic effects.

Going right back to 2010, this is the enduring picture of Conservative government, which the Liberal Democrats still claim to have cushioned us from the worst of: not the parsimony, the defensiveness, the lack of curiosity when disasters occur, not the callousness or myopia, but the sheer indolence.

Decisions are made as if the consequences belonged to someone else. Judicial process is treated like long-grass. Ernest Ryder, senior president of tribunals, said last week that the DWP habitually provided evidence whose quality was so poor it would be "wholly inadmissible" in any other court. People die having had their support system ripped from them and the response is a shrugging "whatever", plus maybe a blast of noise about bias and the last Labour government, like ducks flapping pointlessly on a pond. Every tactic is diversionary; the overarching strategy is, break it and see what happens.

Consensus now is that the Tories were governing, sometimes controversially but broadly effectively, when Brexit came along and capsized everything. This is mistaken: the referendum could only have been called, and the leave campaign only fought, by politicians with a fundamental lack of seriousness, a puerile indifference to the outcome of their decisions.

Long before it gambled with our future prosperity and place in the world, the Conservative party was shooting craps with the lives of its own people.

● Zoe Williams is a Guardian columnist

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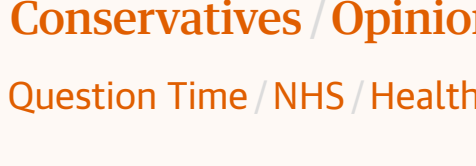
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dismount 13 Nov 2017 3:45

The Tories have ceased to care about a single thing, it's very unusual. Having killed so many directly through their policies they are now strangling the country to death to line their own pockets. This is apparently their definition of patriotism. In reality the party should be outlawed as dangerous to political and actual life.

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john_connors → dismount 13 Nov 2017 3:52

Let's ban Labour too. After all, how many hundreds of thousands were killed in Iraq thanks to Labour policies. Labour really are the true Nasty Party.

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LostInThis → dismount 13 Nov 2017 4:03

This reminds me of that Harry and Paul Question Time episode "The Tories, the Tories, the Tories"

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