

Coalition cuts are a direct attack on women

When the NAW's AGM was held in April 2010, we determined to oppose the public service cuts that all 3 largest parties were proposing to impose "to balance the books". Our opposition was based on the likelihood that cuts would have a greater impact on women than men, both women working in the public sector and using public services to meet their families' needs.

Over the next few weeks of the General Election campaign, we noted that none of the parties published any assessment of how the budget proposals in their manifestos would impact on gender equality, although the Labour Party did commit to doing this in future. The lack of this alongside the abstract nature of debate about which services, which benefits, which jobs, which projects the parties intended to cut, meant that the electorate could not scrutinise the manifestos and make informed choices. The unsurprising outcome was that no party won the trust of the people and there was no victor. And then the men in grey suits pushed the women aside, locked themselves in closed rooms for days on end and then emerged smirking with a new coalition manifesto written by Conservative and Liberal Dem men. A manifesto with no democratic legitimacy at all and with no attempt to conduct any equality impact assessment of its proposals.

Obviously worried about these proposals drifting into the Coalition's budget due on 22nd June, the Minister for Women and Equalities, Theresa May, wrote to Messrs Cameron, Clegg and Osborne on 9th June to "remind colleagues of the legal requirements to additionally consider how women, disabled people and ethnic minorities are affected." She went on to warn "there is areal risk of successful legal challenge by for instance recipients of public services." Well done to the Fawcett Society for standing up for women and mounting a legal challenge straight away; we hope it succeeds. And shame on Nick Clegg for telling his Lib Dem colleagues in June that fairness was "hard-wired" into the Budget. That'll be the same double-speak that says we're all in this together sharing the pain, would it Nick?

The reality is that the unelected coalition plans to share the pain among less well-off people and women and to bulldoze all these cuts through now before people have the time to see how each proposed cut would affect them and their families and campaign against it. They want to rush all this through because they figure that the cover of unelected coalition acting in the national interest against financial Armageddon will not last long and they are right. A bare majority seem to support the cuts programme at present, but this will melt away if we can expose the inherent unfairness and lack of democracy in their plans. Let's just look at the impact of the budget on women (figs from House of Commons, commissioned by Yvette Cooper)and ask who voted for this?

- 600,000 public sector jobs lost by 2016; 2/3rds of these women's jobs
- Abolishing the health in pregnancy grant
- Abolishing the Sure Start maternity grants
- Freezing Child benefit for 3 years
- Requiring single parents whose youngest child starts school to look for paid employment even if they are not ready to do so
- Cutting benefits, tax credits and pensions in line with the Consumer Price Index in place of the Retail Price Index
- Raising VAT from 17.5% to 20%
- Making women carry **72%** of the budget cuts

The short answer is that no one did and this matters hugely to an unelected coalition government with such an unstable base. The NAW is working to undermine its credibility as a champion of fairness and equality because we believe that this is its only claim to legitimacy and if we can expose this as a lie, it will lose people's support. They have made the mistake of claiming to be progressive, committed to fairness and to the whole country working together, all of us sharing the pain. This makes them very vulnerable to charges of hypocrisy, especially as so many of them are millionaires!!

Cameron and Osborne have just cut Child Benefit for households where one person earns over £44,000, still claiming to be doing this in the name of fairness, because it's just not fair for people this rich to be getting a state benefit. There's so much wrong with this analysis you wouldn't know where to start, although Milliband's endorsement of universalism is good. Let's look at the impact on women. Child benefit has traditionally been paid to the main carer, most of whom are women,

for the very good reason that decades of research show that household incomes are not necessarily shared equally and we can't assume that all men earning £44,000 plus will share this with their partners. So it matters that some money goes directly to the main carers so that it can go directly towards the costs of bringing up children. A second consequence for women who will lose child benefit is the loss of years credited into the state pension, so this will result in another cohort of women without a full state pension. In the la la land that the Tories live in, this won't matter since they will be married for ever to men who will share all their worldly goods, but in the real world many will be left poor in old age.

This is not fairness that any of us understand and clearly shows that the Tories are not even going through the motions of considering what impact their policies will have on women. What we have to do is to get this message out to all women and women's organisations that we can reach and then to articulate a broader version of fairness based on fairer taxation and distribution of wealth. Each year we could save £4.7b by extending the 50% tax on incomes to people earning over £100,000, £10b by reforming tax havens and residence rules to reduce tax avoidance, £14.9b with minimum tax rates for tax reliefs such as pension contributions, £30b with a Robin Hood tax, £2.6b by bringing troops home from Afghanistan and a massive £78b by cancelling Trident. The left does need to agree a broad alternative to the slash and burn approach of the Coalition to win support for the campaigns against all the cuts that will emerge over the next few weeks. **The NAW will be developing these themes at the Charter for Women Conference "Cutting women out of the picture; where are we in the new political landscape?" on Saturday 30 October.**

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Executive Committee
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