

## ELECTION 2015:

WHAT'S AT STAKE FOR SOCIAL SECURITY?



**Policy priorities for the next  
government**

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## IN BRIEF:

During this parliament the founding principles of social security have been systematically undermined. Coalition reductions and caps on the social security budget, new stringent conditions on benefit entitlements and increased scapegoating and stigmatisation have led to hardship and struggle for millions of people. Poorer households have fallen even further behind median incomes and those most in need are increasingly unable to access support.

The next government has a duty to create a state that both enables and protects people when they need it most. We need a social security system that prevents poverty, promotes equality, is universal and is society collectively providing security for all.

## THE PROBLEM:

The depth of the crisis facing our social security system cannot be underestimated. The failure of the state to provide for the social and economic well-being of society has greatly accelerated under this government:

- In 2010, the Coalition announced £18 billion of cuts to working-age social security and tax credits by 2014/15.
  - Coalition changes to social security and taxation since 2010 have hit the poorest harder than any other group.
  - 13 million people now live in poverty in the UK. Amongst working-age adults, poverty has risen – in fact it has never been higher – with half of all people living in poverty in a family where someone is in paid work.
  - There has been an unprecedented rise in the use of food banks - almost 1 million requested 3 days' emergency food last year.
  - Child Benefit claimants have faced 5 years of real-terms cuts from 2011, first from freezes and then a 1% limit on up-rating.
  - There has been a 59% increase in the number of people in work and claiming housing benefit.
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- Over 466,000 people had their benefits sanctioned in 2014 including 2,000 who are barred from claiming for 3 years. 100 claimants with mental health problems have their benefits sanctioned every day.
  - Disabled people and those with mental health problems have been affected particularly badly by Coalition reforms, hit simultaneously by up to six cuts with some facing the loss of up to £23,000 each over the 5 years to 2017.
  - By January 2013, 1,300 people undergoing Work Capability Assessments had died after being told they should start preparing to go back to work, and another 2,200 had died before their assessment was complete.

# ACTIONS THAT CAN PROTECT SOCIAL SECURITY

A social security system should ensure that everyone has a decent standard of living free from poverty. But it needs to be more than just a safety-net and compensation for extra costs, it should also be about enabling and supporting people to thrive. The principles of a just and caring state must be restored and our politicians should be bold enough to stand up for it.

## 1. Introduce policies for full employment

to rebalance the economy away from insecure low-paid jobs towards decent, well-paid jobs. High-quality training and apprenticeships must be rolled out across the country.

**2. Create decent jobs** to tackle low pay and end increasing insecurity in the jobs market. Banning zero-hours contracts, formalising vulnerable workers' rights and strengthening employment rights, will be key. Promoting trade union rights and supporting structures for collective bargaining must be part of attempts to improve the social security system.

**3. Create a system based on need and not moral judgements** so that a positive commitment to social security is made. Society must collectively provide security for all citizens, preventing poverty and marginalisation, and enabling people to live full, independent lives with dignity.

**4. Restore the principles of universalism** so that social security is recognised as a political and legal part of being a citizen. Universalism is not only generally more cost-effective than means-testing but also underpins the values of a system of collective responsibility and must be protected.

**5. End regressive housing policies and invest in building social homes.** Ending the Bedroom Tax would begin to stop the punishment of the poorest, but action must be taken to bring down the cost of renting to recognised levels of affordability. In the longer-term some of the £24.6 billion of public funding currently going to landlords in the form of housing benefit should be diverted to build more affordable social homes.

## 6. Enable those with disabilities and mental health problems to live

comfortable and fulfilled lives as much as possible. Many reforms to the current punitive system will be needed but these should be done through consultations led by disabled people themselves. Investing in preventative measures and early intervention are important and benefits should be increased to ensure nobody is in poverty as a result of disability.

**7. Restore legal aid** to re-establish access to justice and ensure free advice, assistance and representation by experts is available for those who need them.

## WHAT'S AT STAKE AT THE ELECTION?

Ahead of this Election, the Chancellor has pledged to take a further £12 billion away from the social security budget, an act that will push thousands more into grinding poverty. It would be disingenuous to argue that the current policies from the main parties would create a vastly improved social security system. The Conservative's have set out to actively demonise and punish those who need a decent system the most; and whilst Labour has made pledges to improve work and increase pay, it does remain too wedded to a punitive system. But recognising these differences does not mean settling for policies that need to be improved. Voting in May should be seen as a stepping stone to a better social security system, rather than an end in itself. At this election there is a huge amount at stake for thousands of people across the country who are committed to a decent and fair social security system. Use your voice and make sure you vote.