Section:GDN BE PaGe:34 Edition Date:140430 Edition:01 Zone: Sent at 28/4/2014 18:52 cYanmaGentaYellowblack

Society

Benefits crackdown leads to divide and rule within poor communities

The coalition's skivers v strivers message is inflaming resentments between those affected by the economic slump

Tom Clark and Gabriella Elgenius

'Scrounging was seen as a widespread problem but mainly for people on different benefits from themselves' Photograph: Matt Cardy/Getty images

"Brown envelope days" was one of the more memorable phrases to emerge in a series of interviews with cash-strapped Britons which we organised and conducted last summer. The phrase was Stephanie's, a 53-year-old former teaching assistant living near Luton, who has had a leg amputated, and is married to 60-year-old former aircraft fitter Martin, who now has advanced cancer.

After a lifetime of toil, in aeroplane hangars and primary schools, the pair are now entirely reliant on housing benefit, disability living allowance (DLA) and employment and support allowance (ESA), three payments at the heart of the coalition's plan to rebalance the books.

Stephanie dreads one particular visitor each day: "It's horrible when you hear the postman come up the path", she scarcely dares look up to see what comes through the letterbox … "because if it's a brown envelope …", Martin interrupts before his wife completes the shared thought: "that means a government letter." Nobody is thrilled by official correspondence, but so predictable is it for this couple that mail from the "welfare" state will be a bossy command, a demand for proof or a threat of some sort, that Stephanie can hardly bear "brown envelope days".

Martin and Stephanie have turned to the community in their hour of need. But instead of compassion, they feel they have been shown contempt. "It's no life really, is it?", Martin reflects, on an existence overshadowed by envelopes.

As they fend off the endless official intrusion and juggle with debts, Martin says that things often "get quite tense" in their Luton living room. It is just one of many homes – from Edinburgh to Essex – where we heard how the bedroom tax, personal capability assessments, and the newly unrebated council tax, were leading to missed meals, fears of eviction and strained relationships. All this breeds resentment; the big question is – resentment of whom? We found that the animosity was often directed against people who are – by any objective measure – in the same boat.

60% of those in households on less than £10,000 a year believe there are many fraudulent benefit claimants

Sixty percent of those in households on less than £10,000 a year, people who are overwhelmingly entitled to some benefit themselves, told YouGov in 2012 that there were not merely a few fraudulent or stubbornly workshy claimants, but many. Such poor families are often strongly supportive of social assistance in principle, but things get more contentious when the question turns to who should get help, with jealousies breaking out in every direction.

The most familiar resentment is the one the coalition inflames. The chancellor, George Osborne pits cash-strapped grafters against layabouts "sleeping off a life on benefits" as if the condition of unemployment could be compared to a boozy night out. There were signs of this resonating with Kate from Mansfield, who works in the public sector for modest pay. She complains about "young girls who've got I forget how many children", and has picked up a bit of politician's rhetoric that subtly separates the jobless from the rest: "working families".

Her "very tiring battle" with the bills is not helped, she says, by seeing "non-working families" affording weekly trips "to the soft play". Indeed, asked what the government should do differently, she answers that, for her, the real problem is "being made to feel as though, as a working family, we're not valued as much as someone out of work".

Such talk sends a shiver down the spines of unwaged Stephanie. Unprompted, she volunteers: "I don't like this title that Cameron keeps saying, 'the hardworking families'. We were a hardworking family until the illness took his job." When the prime minister uses that phrase, she says, it makes her "feel like I'm getting stabbed in the back".

This resentment on the part of struggling workers against the jobless was no surprise. Less expected were all the grudges going in other directions. Unemployed people worry that tax credit top-ups help the low-waged more than them. Moira from Hornchurch was explicit: "I think you get more help now if you are in work".

Most interviewees asserted that scrounging was a widespread problem, but virtually all also felt this affected people on different benefits from themselves.

Both Winston and Jamal claim jobseeker's allowance, and both harbour suspicions about disabled people. "The only people", Jamal says, who he knows who are "doing well at the moment" receive health-related payments. "I have a couple of mates: one's got a bad back, and one's saying he's going a bit loopy … There is nothing wrong with either." Winston, who was sanctioned for breaching strict jobcentre rules, stresses the dedication of his fellow jobseekers – "I see people going to the work club and they are just writing, writing, writing" out applications and letters.

By contrast, the sick make him suspicious. "A young man I used to work with" gets employment and support allowance, and "so he doesn't really have to go to work … He's clearing £400 a month without doing anything … I'm clearing £240 a month and I'm running backwards and forwards … in the Work Programme twice a week".

Stephanie and Martin would, no doubt, feel that they had much to tell jobseekers about the reality of living "on the sick". But they hurl equally stern words the other way. Martin urges the government to say to "these people on jobseeker's … 'there's work there, you do it or you lose your money.'" Stephanie adds "a lot … are lazy". The quadrupling of punitive jobseeker sanctions has obviously passed them by, just as the disability clampdown has escaped Winston's notice.

There were other divisions as well: private tenants understandably envy the secure subsidised tenures on council estates. Small families sometimes resent larger ones: although Denise, a single mother of one in London, is dependent on income support, complains about parents "on benefits [who] have got four or five kids" and who've "got laptops and the latest iPhones". By contrast, Kirsty, with her family of four in Scotland, argues benefits privilege small families. She notes that the maternity grant is only "for your first child", and asks "how they can justify" paying couples "£30 less" for "living together".

We heard about genuine problems "with the fags and the drink", and then a few myths about softer rules for Romanians "with begging children", and even rumours about "an alcoholic" getting a special cheque "of about £200 a week [for] … bottles of vodka". But such tales were no more of a feature than rage against the bankers. The constant resentment was the belief that other poor people were somehow getting a better deal.

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> George Osborne pits cash-strapped grafters against layabouts 'sleeping off a life on benefits'

A couple of interviewees did challenge the scrounger discourse. Top-scoring student Laura, has got herself to college from an impoverished Newcastle home, where the father had been laid off by the steel works, but she has not forgotten her roots. Her early experience on benefits leaves no doubt: "I think that's rubbish about them being too generous".

Then there was indebted professional John, who dismissed concern about scrounging with a traditional leftist line: "rich people don't pay any tax at all, and what they should pay is ridiculously low anyway … [so] … who's the scrounger?".

But both John and Laura are exceptionally educated, and have the intellectual confidence that this often brings. For most of the more representative victims of hard times, however, amid all the talk of layabouts, merely asking for their thoughts on social security invites a defensive response. Stephanie in Luton said: "We just feel like beggars, sitting there with our hands out … Few human beings in that frame of mind will have the confidence to round on their accusers; instead the instinct is to acquit oneself by finding someone else to point the finger at.

It is an understandable reaction, but one which leaves Britain's poor communities very vulnerable to being divided and ruled.

Gabriella Elgenius is based at Nuffield College in the sociology department at Oxford University. This is an edited extract from Hard Times, by Tom Clark with Anthony Heath, published by Yale University Press. To order a copy for £14.99 with free UK p&p, go to guardian.co.uk/bookshop or call 0330 333 6846