

It's official: Tory austerity has stifled the lives of young and poor Britons | Nick Cohen

Nick Cohen

The finality of the grave brings clarity. On the tombstone of this administration the epitaph should read: "Here lies the Conservative party, it brought death to the country it claimed to love. It killed the working class it claimed to represent. It said it was for the north but wouldn't keep northerners alive."

Sir Michael Marmot's [review](#) of health and inequality confirms what you already suspected. But suspecting is one thing and knowing another. Marmot shows that England is now the sick man of Europe with such authority and cool precision, he replaces doubt with certainty and transforms the way you think about your country.

From the end of the 19th century, life expectancy increased by one year every four years for men and every five-and-a-half years for women. Since David Cameron took power in 2010, the steady improvement in the condition of England has stalled and in the case of the poorest gone into reverse. And people say Cameron will only be remembered for Brexit.

Women's life expectancy declined in the most deprived 10% of neighbourhoods. As for their children, they can expect to have worse lives than their mothers did. [Life expectancy](#) is lower in the north than the south. If you are poor in the north-east – that is, if you are in the bottom 10% of the population – your life expectancy is less than if you are poor in London, possibly because in London you can hope to find a halfway decent job, if you are in good health, and move on. In the north-east less opportunity means less hope.

International comparisons illuminate England's sickness. No global pandemic hit between 2010 and 2019. The winters weren't severe. An invading army did not massacre the population. Serial killers did not stalk the streets. In restrained prose, the Marmot inquiry describes instead the enemy within that cut essential services by staggering amounts. Government grants to local authorities fell by 77% between 2010 and 2019. Sure Start centres closed; public health was moved out of the NHS, dumped on local authorities, and then saw its budgets cut, despite [promises to the contrary](#). The slowdown in life expectancy is matched in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, which had the bad luck to share a Conservative government with England.

The true measure of our failure comes from looking at the other rich countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. English men had the second largest reduction in life expectancy improvement after the US. Meanwhile life expectancy for women in the UK showed a 90% slowdown, the worst performance anywhere in the rich world. No one knows why women

are suffering so, but the evidence that austerity hit them hardest has to be a part of [the answer](#). It's not that public health had been racing ahead in the late 20th century and couldn't be expected to maintain its breakneck pace in the 2010s. "Many countries have higher levels of life expectancy and continue to improve at a much faster rate than the UK," the Marmot review concluded.

The Health Foundation, which supported the research, can show that the Tories' new seats in the north have [lower average healthy life expectancies](#) – that is, life without chronic illnesses – than Labour seats. It implies it would be a blessing if Johnson decided that he had a political interest in changing that. I hope he does but I have my doubts, despite Johnson wanting to end austerity and the [NHS cooing](#) about its commitment to tackling health inequalities.

The Conservatives have already taken decisions that will have monstrous consequences. The hard Brexit they favour will hit the poorest regions hardest, and they show no signs of caring. The next phase of [universal credit](#) will capture 750,000 sick and disabled people, many of whom do not have the cognitive skills to negotiate the system.

The culture of Tory England matters as much as its political decisions. Ever since the Brexit referendum I've written about the folly of allowing journalists to run a country. [Boris Johnson](#) and Michael Gove are not merely journalists but the worst type of hacks: crowd-pleasing, dilettante opinionators, performing bullshitters, who do not see wilful stupidity as a source of shame but as a smart career move. It's not just that they can picture the ignorant attacks from the right that a policy of improving the national health would bring: they've written them themselves.

Jon Ashworth, Labour's health spokesman, makes the point well. He noticed that the Marmot inquiry found that mortality rates have increased for 45- to 49-year-olds. In the US these ["deaths of despair"](#) have attracted huge interest, particularly after the death rates for middle-aged white men began to reach the level of their African- and Native-American contemporaries. The same phenomenon can be seen here among middle-aged men (deaths of despair among women are also [rising](#), but less quickly). Now suppose that the government considered curbing alcoholism with minimum prices, health warnings and an advertising ban. Johnson and Gove would know their [own words](#) on the nanny state would be thrown in their faces.

Hardly anyone has noticed that there has been no great pressure from Labour to relieve the health crisis. It may have shouted loudly about food banks and passed its conscience round for the public to applaud. But over the protests of Ashworth and others, Corbynism remained a thoroughly bourgeois movement. As the Institute for Fiscal Studies [noted](#), at the last election Labour preferred to spend "considerably more" on making up the pensions of "relatively well off" Waspi women than on alleviating the all too genuine despair of the working poor.

Write like this and one is in danger of falling into the journalism of despair. So I will end with an upbeat question. This cannot go on – can it? The British don't expect much from their politicians. But is it too much to ask that they stop trying to kill us?

- Nick Cohen is an Observer columnist