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We're not 'all in this together'

Dave Harper

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Since Autumn 2008 when the recent economic crisis began, unemployment has risen drastically, especially amongst young people. So the country receives less taxes and has to pay more benefits.

Unsurprisingly, there is a greater demand for benefits during a recession. For those who already experience mental distress, a recession causes further problems. They will find it harder to find work which might help their recovery; and, with huge cuts in welfare provision, they will receive less support. There is a strong link between poverty and unemployment and increased mental health problems like depression or suicide. As well as an increased demand for benefits, the recession will increase pressure on charities and mental health services.

The playwright David Hare recently observed that a crisis in capitalism -- the recession caused by the banking crisis -- has somehow been transformed by many politicians into a crisis in the welfare state. We are told that welfare spending is 'profligate' and that it needs to be cut so that the UK is not downrated by Credit Ratings Agencies. These are the same Agencies which gave the Icelandic banks a clean bill of financial health just before they failed. But the reason that the proportion of national income spent on welfare is rising is due to people's rising needs.

Was it 'profligate public spending' which caused the economic crisis? No. Was it those in receipt of mental health services and other welfare payments? No. So why is it that these groups are the ones to suffer from the Government's cuts? The crisis was caused by banks which gambled recklessly with financial products - Weapons of Financial Mass Destruction - that very few financiers could understand. It was also caused by Governments, for ideological reasons, failing to give the regulators any teeth. And by dodgy Credit Ratings Agencies which gave risky banks Triple-A ratings.

Many users of mental health services will feel uncertain when they hear about proposed cuts in Local Authority budgets and reports of NHS managers cutting services (even though there is not supposed to be a cut in the NHS budget). These cuts already affect many of the charities which provide much-needed help -- the very charities supposed to be supported by David Cameron's Big Society initiative. So, as well as introduce changes to welfare benefits just when they are most needed, it is worrying to hear about plans to reduce welfare spending.

In typically dramatic fashion, the Mad Pride demo in London last October brought attention to these issues. Despite miserable weather a group of over a hundred people converged at Speakers' Corner to hear speeches about the

problems to be caused by welfare cuts. Speakers challenged the claim by coalition politicians that 'we're in this together'. What utter nonsense: 23 of the 29 members of the Tory-Liberal Cabinet are known to be millionaires!