



The **Methodist Church** 



**Housing  
Justice**



 **The Methodist Church  
In Ireland**



THE CHURCH IN WALES  
YR EGLWYS YNG NGHYMRU



The Church of Scotland

Methodist Church House  
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6 June 2013

Dear Prime Minister,

We wish to express our grave concern about a number of instances in the recent weeks where senior members of the Government, including the Chairman of the Conservative Party, have given misleading and inaccurate information about those on benefits. As such, we write to you in your roles as Prime Minister and as leader of the Conservative Party.

There are three specific pieces of information that have been cited by senior Government ministers which are demonstrably and factually wrong. We ask that these are corrected as soon as possible, and that an apology is offered to those who have been misrepresented:

1. On 30 March, Conservative Party chairman Grant Shapps stated that 878,300 people had dropped claims to incapacity benefit "rather than completing a medical test" as evidence of the need for welfare reform<sup>1</sup>. This gave the impression that those who withdrew their application had submitted false claims or feared that they would not be eligible for benefit if tested, something that was repeated in media interviews.

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<sup>1</sup> Press Association 30/03/13 <http://uk.news.yahoo.com/nearly-900-000-drop-benefit-claims-225950176.html#TkS3SMV>

In fact, the figure refers to every time an individual stopped claiming ESA during the assessment period since October 2008. Many of these claims were for short-term problems; others finished when a partner's income increased, removing them from eligibility. There is no evidence that people withdrew their applications "rather than" undergo a medical test, which it is implied that they would have failed.

2. On 12 April, the Daily Mail quoted the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Iain Duncan Smith. "Already we've seen 8,000 people who would have been affected by the cap move into jobs," he was quoted as saying. "This clearly demonstrates that the cap is having the desired impact"<sup>2</sup>. The evidence upon which this figure was based contained an explicit warning that it was not possible to draw a link between the numbers affected by the benefit cap or the numbers going into employment and the effectiveness of the policy<sup>3</sup>. Yet Mr Duncan Smith stated that these figures showed that the benefit cap was having "the desired impact".
3. In an interview with the Daily Mail on 8 April, Mr Duncan Smith said that many people were applying for Disability Living Allowance before the new Personal Independence Payment was introduced in order to avoid the new medical test<sup>4</sup>. It is absolutely clear from the publically available data that this was not the case. The small amount of statistical evidence produced to support the claim appears to refer to changes in caseload rather than the readily available new-claims data.

*Details of the inaccuracies are given in Appendix 1, and samples of the misleading and widespread coverage of the inaccuracies are given in Appendix 2.*

All three of these statements have drawn on high quality Government statistical data which has then been misused and misinterpreted. All serve to undermine the credibility of benefit claimants. They were all released at the same time as major changes to the benefit system, which will reduce the level of support many families receive.

It is disturbing that these three instances conform to an apparent pattern of misleading and sometimes wholly inaccurate information from the Government when dealing with the issue of social security; a practice that has added to the misunderstanding and stigma which continues to pollute the debate around poverty in the UK. We are concerned that these inaccuracies paint some of the most vulnerable in our society in an unfavourable light, stigmatising those who need the support of the benefits system. No political or financial imperative can be given to make this acceptable.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2308159/16-000-fewer-households-affected-benefits-cap-500-half-jobsrest-moved-cheaper-houses.html>

<sup>3</sup> [http://statistics.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd1/adhoc\\_analysis/2013/Ben\\_Cap\\_Updated\\_Estimate.pdf](http://statistics.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd1/adhoc_analysis/2013/Ben_Cap_Updated_Estimate.pdf) & <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/benefitcap-statistical-data.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2305556/Last-minute-rush-avoid-tough-new-test-disability-benefit.html> & <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2301735/I-bogus-disabled-DO-better-Ex-TV-host-new-Work-Minister-UKs-THREE-MILLION-claiming-disability-benefit.html> an earlier report of increased DLA claims by the Minister for the Disabled, without quoting specific figures.

Churches and Church groups have repeatedly expressed concern about the portrayal of the poorest and most vulnerable in society, writing to you personally on at least two previous occasions. In November 2010, a number of signatories to this letter wrote to ask that the Chancellor correct the October 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review statement in which he overstated by three-fold the level of benefit fraud. We are grateful that, in response, Lord Freud corrected his ministerial forward to the Government document, *Tackling Fraud and Error in the Benefit and Tax Credit Systems*, but note that the error has not been corrected in Hansard or to Parliament<sup>5</sup>. Earlier this year, four Churches wrote to you about their report, *The lies we tell ourselves: ending comfortable myths about poverty*, which gave numerous examples of information being manipulated in order to blame the poor for their poverty<sup>6</sup>.

The signatories of this letter have different views on the changes to the benefit system being undertaken by this Government. What unites us is the belief that the debate around these reforms should be based on truthful information. As Christians we believe that all people are made in the image of God, and as such are to be loved and valued. At the very least, the most vulnerable deserve to be spoken of truthfully and with respect.

We ask you, as Prime Minister and as leader of the Conservative Party, to ensure that the record is put straight, and that statistics are no longer manipulated in a way which stigmatises the poorest in our society. We promise to support you in efforts to ensure that debates on poverty are rooted in fact and not on assertion.

Yours faithfully,

The Revd Stephen Keyworth, The Baptist Union of Great Britain

The Right Revd Nick Baines, Bishop of Bradford

Niall Cooper, National Coordinator, Church Action on Poverty

Alison Gelder, Chief Executive of Housing Justice

The Revd R. Kenneth Lindsay, President of the Methodist Church in Ireland

The Right Revd Tim Stevens, Bishop of Leicester

The Revd Dr Mark Wakelin, President of the Methodist Conference

The Revd Robert Hopcroft, Chairman of the Moravian Church in Great Britain and Ireland

Paul Parker, Recording Clerk, Quakers in Britain

The Revd Sally Foster-Fulton, Convener of the Church and Society Council, the Church of Scotland

The Very Revd Ian D Barcroft, Convener, Church in Society Committee, Scottish Episcopal Church

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmhansrd/cm101020/debtext/101020-0001.htm#10102049000003>

<sup>6</sup> [www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/truthandliesaboutpoverty](http://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/truthandliesaboutpoverty)

The Revd Roberta Rominger, General Secretary of the United Reformed Church

The Revd Carol Wardman, Bishops' Adviser for Church and Society, the Church in Wales