



The Brown Envelope Book

Poetry and prose on experiences
of unemployment, the benefits system,
disability and work capability
assessments

Selected and edited by
Alan Morrison and Kate Jay-R

with a Foreword by
John McArdle
of the Black Triangle Campaign

“A much-needed collection that powerfully dispels and challenges the oft-repeated scrounger myths we are relentlessly fed. It truly shows how powerful the brown envelope is in instilling fear, shame, and dread into the lives of so many people. Read this, get angry, and take action!”



Dr Kayleigh Garthwaite

author of the paper

**‘Fear of the Brown Envelope:
Exploring Welfare Reform
with Long-Term Sickness
Benefits Recipients’**



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In collaboration with Don't Go Breaking Our Arts

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Acknowledgments



'One cannot but wonder at this constantly recurring phrase 'getting something for nothing,' as if it were the peculiar and perverse ambition of disturbers of society. Except for our animal outfit, practically all we have is handed to us gratis. Can the most complacent reactionary flatter himself that he invented the art of writing or the printing press, or discovered his religious, economic and moral convictions, or any of the devices which supply him with meat and raiment or any of the sources of such pleasure as may derive from literature or the fine arts? In short, civilization is little else than getting something for nothing.'

– James Harvey Robinson



'They could not bear to see the unemployed men and their wives and children starving. In order to prevent hardship, they felt that they had to provide these people with some means of sustenance. Their principles told them, nevertheless, that if people were given something for nothing, it would demoralize their character. ...they were faced with the horrible choice of (1) letting the unemployed starve, or (2) destroying their moral character... They decided to give the unemployed families "relief payments"... (They considered using the English term "dole", but with their characteristic American penchant for euphemism, they decided on the less offensive term). To make sure that the unemployed would not take their unearned payments for granted, however, they decided that the "relief" was to be accompanied by a moral lesson: to wit: the obtaining of the assistance would be made so difficult, humiliating, and disagreeable that there would be no temptation for anyone to go through the process unless it was absolutely necessary; the moral disapproval of the community would be turned upon the recipients of the money at all times in such a way that they would try hard to get "off relief" and "regain their self-respect". Some even proposed that people on relief be denied the vote, so that the moral lesson would be more deeply impressed upon them. Others suggested that their names be published at regular intervals in the newspapers...'

– S.I. Hayakawa

*'The Story of A-town and B-ville: Second Semantic Parable',
Language In Thought And Action (1949)*

Against Moral Anaesthesia

John McArdle
of the Black Triangle Anti-Defamation Campaign

Q&A

John, what first prompted you to start up the Black Triangle Anti Defamation Campaign?

Back in 2010 a virulent campaign against benefit claimants was mounted by the government and the right wing media in Britain. Disabled claimants were demonised and dehumanised as ‘scroungers’ and fraudsters. All the while, the DWP’s own official figures showed that disability benefit fraud was a mere 0.7% of total claims.

The right-wing propaganda campaign was so successful that, when canvassed, the general public estimated that 34 times more benefit money was claimed fraudulently than official estimates: the public thought that £24 out of every £100 spent on benefits is claimed fraudulently, compared with official estimates of £0.70 per £100.

Meanwhile, as the coalition government sought to scapegoat claimants for the public deficit following the financial crisis of 2010 implementing the most savage and brutal programme of public spending cuts in British history, bankers – who behaved criminally and who caused the crisis – were bailed out with public money and the richest national and multinational corporations were allowed to get away with tax avoidance to the tune of 70 times the annual cost of official benefit fraud estimates. Of course, Europe has seen this sort of thing before in the Great Depression of the 1930s. Disabled people were blamed then too.

Owing to the introduction of the Work Capability Assessment regime – first introduced under New Labour’s Gordon Brown and James Purnell – scores of reports started reaching us of the deaths of disabled people as a direct consequence of having had their benefits unlawfully cut off.

We saw that it was imperative to document and publicise what was happening to people and to fight back against the tsunami of falsehood that had swept Britain, poisoning people’s minds and enabling these flagrant abuses of the fundamental human rights of disabled people – not least the very right to life itself – to take place with official sanction in plain sight. The mass media ignored it. It was left up to us as disabled people to take the fight to the government ourselves. To have remained silent was to give in to this culture of death and to be complicit.

At first people simply didn't believe it.

Our task was to state the empirical facts. Truth had perished in the public square along with so many of our dead.

Why the Black Triangle?

Black Triangle Campaign's banner reads 'Disabled People Fighting For Our Future: Custodians of Our Past'.

"Remembrance without resolve is a hollow gesture. Awareness without action changes nothing".

We must never allow our memorialisation of the victims of the Holocaust to be merely symbolic. We must not deny our acts of remembrance the power to gift us with the ability to truly honour the lives of all the victims by learning the lessons of its history in order that we may resolve to better recognise and oppose the reemergence of ideas, ideologies and patterns of behaviour that gave rise to that descent into unbridled evil, barbarism and cold blooded murder on a scale that was unprecedented in human history.

We have learned from Holocaust studies that in order for a group, party or government to carry out immoral actions, attacks and murders against another group it is first necessary to 'other' that group and dehumanise them.

This makes it psychologically possible for otherwise 'normal' people to participate in those acts either as 'perpetrators' as enablers or 'bystanders'.

The machinery of the State can then proceed unhindered in crushing the victim group with little or no regard to normative social values. Acts that clearly violate the fundamental human rights of the individuals thus become officially sanctioned and normalised.

The Black Triangle was an assignation given to prisoners in the vast network of concentration camps of the Third Reich. It was a broad category that included homeless people, alcoholics, unemployed people who were labelled 'workshy' ('Arbeitscheu'); conscientious objectors, draft dodgers, pacifists, Roma and Sinti people, and many others who were considered to be 'unproductive' and a drain on the Nazi State's resources.

At the inception of the Holocaust disabled people were branded "useless eaters" and "life unworthy of life" for whom a campaign of euthanasia was the greatest kindness that the state could accord to the victims' 'miserable lives'.

An article published by the UK Holocaust Memorial Trust succinctly summarises what happened during Aktion T-4 [<https://www.hmd.org.uk/learn-about-the-holocaust-and-genocides/nazi-persecution/disabled-people/>] and here are the most germane excerpts:

Severely mentally and physically disabled people, as well as those perceived to have disabilities, were targeted because of Nazi beliefs that disabled people were a burden both to society and to the state.

From 1939 to 1941 the Nazis carried out a programme of 'euthanasia', known as the T4 programme. The name T4 is an abbreviation of Tiergartenstrasse 4, the address from which the programme was coordinated.

Propaganda against the mentally disabled: in 1933 the Law for the Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Offspring was passed, allowing for the forced sterilisation of those regarded as 'unfit'. This included people with conditions such as epilepsy, schizophrenia and alcoholism. Prisons, nursing homes, asylums, care homes for the elderly and special schools were targeted to select people for sterilisation. It has been estimated that between 1933 and 1939, 360,000 individuals were subjected to forced sterilisation.

In 1939 the killing of disabled children and adults began. All children under the age of three who had illnesses or a disability, such as Down's Syndrome, or cerebral palsy, were targeted under the T4 programme. A panel of medical experts were required to give their approval for the 'euthanasia', or supposed 'mercy-killing', of each child...

...Following the outbreak of war in September 1939 the programme was expanded. Adults with disabilities, chronic illnesses, mental health problems and criminals who were not of German origin were included in the programme. Six killing centres were established to speed up the process - the previous methods of killing people by lethal injection or starvation were deemed too slow to cope with large numbers of adults. The first experimental gassings took place... thousands of disabled patients were killed in gas chambers disguised as shower rooms...

It is estimated that close to 250,000 disabled people were murdered under the Nazi regime.

After the cessation of the secret Aktion T4 programme following an outcry by the Catholic Archbishop of Gallen physically and/or mentally impaired 'unproductive' people were simply dispatched to other killing centres and death camps.

But what has the machinery of systematic mass murder got to do with the deaths of disabled people under the UK government's welfare reform programme?

Those of you who have seen the film *Schindler's List* will be familiar with the adage "Whoever destroys a soul it is considered as if he destroyed an entire world. And whoever saves a life it is considered as if he saved an entire world" (Jerusalem Talmud Sanhedrin 4.1 22a).

All lives are infinitely precious and sacred. Propaganda and falsehoods disseminated by government ministers and the right wing media in our country branding sick and disabled people as benefit cheats are an attack on the dignity of the individual and end up costing lives. This is a lesson that humanity should have learned from the holocaust yet we see exactly the same sort of scapegoating today in our own country. This is why we have fought tooth and nail

A Beginner's Guide to Scroungerology

Alan Morrison

As I sit writing this, ex-Chancellor George Osborne, architect of the devastating austerity cuts of 2010-16 that offloaded onto the poorest in our society responsibility for repaying a 'deficit' which came about by propping up the crashed banking sector for its own rapacious malfeasance, has just been appointed partner at investment bank Robey Warshaw. George '9 Jobs' Osborne already has one position as an adviser to fund manager Black Rock which pays him the princely sum of £65,000 for one day a week. ONE DAY. What crowning irony that the Chancellor of a Thousand Cuts, who made it his mission to pay back the 'deficit' after the banking crash of 2008, is now to become an investment banker himself.

In gorging his cupidity still more from having sold his soul to Mammon many times over, and in addition to his gratuitous inherited wealth and baronetcy, Osborne might content himself that he has attained the ultimate status of personifying one of the most Unacceptable Faces of Capitalism of our time. He has also finally confirmed his status as moral anathema to all recognised fair, compassionate and rational measures of basic decency. He and his equally unscrupulous cohorts, ex-PM David Cameron and the accursed former DWP Secretary and architect of the universally discredited Universal Credit, 'Sir' Iain Duncan Smith, have left behind them a Foodbank Britain beset by Victorian levels of abject poverty, starved children, epidemic street homelessness and general immiseration; a broken-souled society of 'poor doors' and 'homeless spikes'.

It was specifically in response to Osborne's egregious Emergency Budget of 2010 that I first mustered my energies to gather together as many fellow poets and writers as I could towards a protest anthology which started life as an e-book and was promptly emailed directly to all then-sitting MPs. Donations towards a print publication of the anthology, most notably and generously from Michael Rosen, followed, and *Emergency Verse – Poets in Defence of the Welfare State* was eventually published and launched to a packed Poetry Library at the Southbank Centre in January the following year. In 2012, a second, even vaster tome, *The Robin Hood Book – Verse Versus Austerity*, was published. The two unknowingly trend-setting anthologies comprised over 200 poets and writers from the well established to the relatively unknown. Criticised in some quarters at the time for angrily catastrophising, pretty much everything predicted in both anthologies' polemical projections came to pass.

A hitherto mostly apolitical poetry scene was resuscitated into verse-activism in the ensuing months and years: the *Morning*

Star's poetry column exploded with political poems; other anthological initiatives sprang up nationwide, such as *Fit for Work: Poets Against Atoz*; and journals and webzines such as *Prole*, *Proletarian Poetry*, *Poetry Republic*, and *Lumpen - A Journal of Poor and Working Class writing*, struck chords. In 2015 an ebook to coincide with the Labour leadership contest, *Poets for Corbyn*, appeared, and in 2016, the memorable *Poems for Jeremy Corbyn* was published by Shoetsring Press (ed. Merryn Williams). That same year, the release of Ken Loach's film-polemic on the benefits cuts, *I, Daniel Blake*, discomfited cinema-goers with a new kitchen-sink realism for Foodbank Britain. Beyond 2012, as writer, and editor of *The Recusant* (of which Caparison is the occasional imprint), I started a new polemical poetry forum, *Militant Thistles*, to continue in the spirit of the two Caparison anthologies, while my own verse-activism continued in individual form in a collection formed around the horrors of Tory welfare 'reform', *Tan Raptures* (Smokestack, 2017).

There was also a polemical mushrooming of books mostly from the radical imprints such as Verso, Zero, Zed Books and Pluto Press. Among the most interesting, Owen Hatherley's *The Ministry of Nostalgia*, which tackled government austerity narratives, and David Frayne's *The Refusal of Work: The Theory and Practice of Resistance to Work*. The latter, a deconstruction of today's punishing work ethic, is a theme on which this writer has polemicised for some years - specifically in relation to the veneration of paid employment (as opposed to authentic 'occupation'), and its prescriptive, even proscriptive, control and suppression of authentic personality. There has also been, more recently, *Crippled: Austerity and the Demonization of Disabled People* by Frances Ryan, and the important and compendious *Scroungers: Moral Panics and Media Myths* by my brother, James Morrison, who contributed a piece entitled 'Farewell Welfare?' to the last anthology, and has added another apposite contribution for this one.

It was and remains an enormous challenge to counter the still-toxic 'welfare' narrative in wider culture, to fight against the best efforts of mainstream politicians and newspapers, government ministers and right-wing tabloids, to keep up the specious narrative of 'strivers vs skivers'. This scrounger rhetoric, or 'Scroungerology' as I call it, has gripped the national psyche to such an extent that the welfare state has mutated into a national hate-object - a Scapegoat State - nowhere more so than among those most in need of it. It has been reframed as a scrounger-hatching state Behemoth that had to be put back in its altruistic place and poked with sharp stigmatising sticks until it regressed again to the more judgemental, begrudging, nudging entity originally envisaged by Beveridge.

It's little known that the so often hagiographised Beveridge had eugenics leanings, as did many intellectuals of his time, both on the Left and Right of politics, and that such ideas influenced aspects

of his eponymous 'Report'. One example of this was the grading of child allowances so that, counterintuitively, better off parents were paid at a higher rate to poorer parents, thus encouraging the former whilst discouraging the latter from reproducing. This was in keeping with eugenicist principles that 'undesirable' traits believed to be inheritable behaviours, such as, bizarrely, poverty, and, most disturbingly, perceived genetic defects as manifest in physical and mental disability, could actually be 'bred out' of the human gene pool. In our own recent history, the Tories were much less covert and infinitely less 'well meaning' than Beveridge when bringing in the brazenly Malthusian two child benefit cap in 2017.

All that said, current calls for a new 'Beveridge Report' to address the mass immiseration caused by the pandemic are welcome - provided, of course, this leads to a rehumanisation of the welfare state and a restitution of more compassionate social security. It is a dire indictment of ten years of Tory rule that something of such a fundament and scale is now, once again in our history, necessitated; but then the past decade has seen such a remorseless full scale attempt by the succession of Tory-led governments to dismantle our welfare state that this can hardly be surprising.

Today, the DWP might as well stand for the Department for War on the Poor. So feared are the auspices of the DWP that their ubiquitous and unmistakably brutalist brown envelopes - or 'Caxton tans' - have become themselves paper symbols of state malice towards its claimants; agents of malignant governmental origami. It can only be a matter of time before Brown Envelope Phobia is included in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*. Indeed, one of this anthology's endorsers, the University of Birmingham's Dr Kayleigh Garthwaite, authored an important academic paper titled 'Fear of the Brown Envelope', in which she focused on how these vicious missives can induce phobic reactions in their recipients. Hence, of course, the title of this anthology.

So notorious has the weapon of the brown envelope become that, according to current speculation among Facebook users and others, the DWP is apparently planning on replacing it with a white one - perhaps to help it camouflage better in our future post. Nonetheless, the symbolic resonance of the brown envelope is indelible in the national claimant psyche; and, since the coercive content of such envelopes will remain the same, the change to white paper will sadly not signal a truce but merely give more element of surprise for the ambusher. A similarly empty gesture of cosmetic change occurred recently with a tonal switch on the interminable DWP automated phone line: its once notorious loop of 'Spring' from *The Four Seasons* brought a whole new meaning to David Mercer's titular phrase, *Let's Murder Vivaldi*.

This matter is given witty shrift in this anthology with

to challenging received narratives of disability and incapacity, as well as battling the stigma of unemployment.

Certainly most of us here, as poets and writers, more than appreciate the potentially transformative notion of a universal basic income, since this would allow many poets and artists to continue pursuing their callings with a guaranteed level of subsistence to keep them going during the - often long - periods when there is no remuneration for their work. (In 2017, to coincide with the publication of *Tan Raptures*, I penned a complementary article touching on these themes, which is part-reproduced herein just prior to the start of the poetry pages).

But more broadly, we also support current notions for something post-Covid of the scale and scope of the 'Beveridge Report'; a reformation, if you like, of the welfare state: a new-style Attlee settlement for the nation, and a return to a more compassionate, human-centred social security system. We might, for a start, petition for it to include the following:



- An abolition of the work capability assessments and a full public inquiry into deaths and suicides linked to the DWP and WCAs
- An abolition of Universal Credit and replacement with compassionate social security
- A restitution of private rent controls
- An uplift of local housing allowance in line with rental market rates of every district
- An abolition of the benefit cap
- An abolition of 'two child' benefit limits
- An abolition of the bedroom tax
- A Universal Basic Income (UBI)
- A four-day week
- A restitution of Legal Aid for those most in need
- A governmentally legislated outlawing of 'No DSS' discrimination...

from *Diary of an Armchair Campaigner*

Kate Jay-R

I began writing a diary of events in 2012 and called it *Diary Of An Armchair Campaigner*. I wasn't sure whether I was going to do anything with it or just for my own personal record of events in relation to Welfare Reform. Horrors were happening so thick and fast I needed to capture it: people dying, poetry, thoughts, Facebook posts, injustices, latest outrages, snippets from articles, replies and counter-replies from my MP and blog posts. I have revisited it from time to time but not in its entirety, until now. Only now, since we decided to do this anthology, have I been able to use it as a map and timeline, to set in context many of the poems that follow.

What prompted me to start writing it was the death of Karen Sherlock.

On June 11th 2012 here is an excerpt of what I wrote:

I have kept thinking about starting it but the campaigning - mainly against the Welfare Reform Bill online - takes it out of you. Means there's little time left for reflection... eats away at your energy reserves.

But I decided to make a start today, every day is, in fact, filled with startling new revelations relating to this government, but yesterday the deaths associated with the Work Capability Assessment, otherwise known as WCA, was brought nearer to home when I heard one of our online community died a few days ago. Her name was Karen... I knew her by name and remember once or twice chatting to her about her predicament... she was put through unavoidable suffering by being placed in the Work-Related Activity Group (WRAG) of the Employment and Support Allowance (ESA). I heard she was eventually put in the Support Group. This is the group where it is said you have to be practically dying before you can get into it, though clearly our friend was, and still had to fight.

Later that day I popped into Sue Marsh's blog *Diary Of A Benefit Scrounger*. The blog that day read: RIP Karen Sherlock. Here is her Twitter profile: 'Chronic Spoonie, lots wrong. ESA stopped by this inhumane government. Preparing for dialysis. Each day is tough.' Sue continued: 'Karen embodied our fight in almost every way. She was desperately ill. Her kidneys were failing, putting a huge strain on her body. Ultimately it seems she died of a cardiac arrest. An operation had recently been cancelled at the last minute, though I have no idea why or if it is relevant to her death.'

I was shocked and saddened, by each new depth that this Coalition government stooped to, and it brought it home even more as it was one of our 'online community'. It was no longer something that you could try and kid yourself wasn't so widespread. This was happening in our country in 2012. The sick and disabled, dying,

because of years of slow drip drip propaganda and vilification of the disabled by a heartless government hell-bent on ideological cuts and demolition of the welfare state.

The media had upped the ante against benefit claimants, softening up the public for the all-out assault on Social Security or welfare as it was now being called. In the same month that Karen Sherlock died, David Cameron aligned himself on the side of workers 'rather than those making a living on benefits'. It was a poorly known fact that a single unemployed person aged over 25 years got around £71 per week to live on (excluding housing and council tax benefits.) How then was this 'making a living'? But Cameron knew exactly what he was doing. He was playing to the gallery in the form of the *Daily Mail* baying mob who'd already been indoctrinated to think that benefit recipients got too much because they had all seen the screeching headlines about benefit caps of 26K. 26K? Most people on benefits got under 10K at this point. In the few thousand cases where claimants got 26K, the families didn't see this - it went in rent to profiteering landlords, but Dave and his tricksters would rather have blamed the claimant than the landlords and the rising rents they failed to regulate. It suited the ConDems' ideological agenda if the masses believed benefits claimants all got 26K. But Cameron stated he wanted to 'end the culture of entitlement'.

Meanwhile, a prominent disability campaigner on Facebook posted about his tribunal result. His appeal had been disallowed. He received nil points at his two Atos assessments despite having cerebral palsy and the hospital confirming with x rays that his CP was arthritic: 'The Atos doctor deliberately misled the tribunal with the evidence she supplied. The tribunal was also a farce. The judge totally ignored everything I'd said with respect to what my limitations were. There were even surreal moments. The Atos doctor in the second assessment stated that I was 'smartly dressed'. The jacket I wore to that assessment is creased, faded and frayed in several places. I wore the same jacket to the tribunal and asked the judge how on earth could anyone say this jacket is smart. The judge replied it could be seen as smart. I laughed and said if I wore this to an interview the only job I'd get is as a road sweeper. Then, even more stupidly the doctor at the tribunal said I could be smart compared to someone wearing a ripped t- shirt!!'

In July 2012, after hearing a speech David Cameron delivered on Welfare on June 25th in Bluewater, Kent, I drafted a response which was taken up by the Spartacus community, slightly re-jigged and sent to the PM.

It was a very long, detailed letter refuting all the inflammatory generalisations with facts. Here is just a small excerpt:

You talk about it becoming “acceptable for many people to choose a life on benefits”... But do people really sit down and think this, ignoring all the careers advice and ambitions they’ve ever had? Tell me, Mr Cameron, do you think work is a good thing? From the way you talk it would seem so. That’s why we are struggling with this flaw in your argument: if work is a good and desirable thing, then why would people choose a life on benefits? Because from the way you’re talking it sounds as if you think a life on benefits is a better choice than the one of work...

We agree that working-age welfare should be about providing a safety net. However, this is not happening. People are becoming homeless; the biggest of all threats to safety is to lose your home and this is a direct result of government policy to restrict and reduce housing benefits. How can somebody think about a job when they are having to survive? Food and shelter are basic human needs. People are going hungry, hence the huge increase in food banks around the country...

You then go on to say that “we’ve got to recognise that in the end, the only thing that really beats poverty, long-term, is work”. If by work you mean a person who is able, and of his or her own free choice, uses their time constructively, including pursuits which often do not pay, eg voluntary work, the arts, education, caring for children, caring for the sick etc, then nobody would disagree with you. What people do object to is the stick approach, the bullying, the compulsion, being drafted onto community service mandatory labour (which is the work usually reserved for criminals - so what sort of message are you giving there?).

So yes, let’s have a sensible and intelligent debate about work. Work is not always good for you. Some people have their health ruined through work. Research has shown the right sort of work at the right sort of pay is right for some of the people, some of the time. But you are trying to prescribe a one-size-fits-all solution, instead of celebrating diversity, and it is doomed to failure...

You then mention that you have “yet to introduce a system whereby after a certain period on benefits, everyone who was physically able to would be expected to do some form of full-time work helping the community, like tidying up the local park.”

We take great exception to this statement. Firstly, the discrimination that people with mental health problems face is evident in your statement by referring to “physical ability”. Secondly, why do you think it is a “perfectly reasonable thing to expect” to punish people on benefits in the same way as criminals on community service, by compelling them to do full-time work, especially when in many cases it is a direct result of Coalition policies that people have ended up on the dole? Thirdly, if there are full time jobs to be done in the community, then why not offer them as full salaried jobs instead of ‘punishments’? We fear that these will be jobs that have been slashed as part of the public sector cuts, only to be taken up by private providers who pocket a tidy sum while the unemployed are doing compulsory labour in direct contravention of article 4 of the European Convention of Human Rights...

You talk about contribution, and “recognising and rewarding those who have paid into the system for years”... So then, perhaps you could explain to us why people are now losing their Incapacity Benefit for good if they are migrated to ESA-WRAG and their partner earns more than £7,500. Yes, we did

say that - £7,500 - just in case, with all these high benefit amounts you keep quoting, you forget about those at the pitifully low end.

People like Karen Sherlock. You may have heard her name. She was diabetic. Her symptoms included chronic kidney failure, partial blindness, a heart condition, and unpredictable bouts of severe vomiting. But the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) essentially told her to get back to work. She lost her contributions-based Employment and Support Allowance and recently died of heart failure, scared and abandoned by a government that should have been caring for her. Ironically, she was placed in the Support Group only a couple of weeks before she died... it is too late for Karen and her family. Your words that "this is very simply about backing those who work hard and do the right thing" begs the question - whatever did someone as sick as Karen do wrong?...'

In July 2012, the government was nevertheless finding the appeals against Atos assessments were costing millions and there was gridlock with the hearing of appeals. But instead of making the Work Capability Assessment (WCA) fairer, so there were fewer appeals, the government proposed making appeals harder to access from April 2013 because so many people were having their original decisions overturned on appeal. They proposed that appeals would only be allowed once the DWP had considered a revision of your claim. The government indicated that there would be no time limit by which the DWP must complete a revision request, nor would there be provision for Employment and Support Allowance to be paid pending the outcome of the revision. This meant that a claimant who had wrongly been put onto JobSeekers Allowance could be parked there for months or longer, being hassled into applying for jobs, being subject to sanctions, before having their appeal heard. This extra hoop to jump through was now known as Mandatory Reconsideration - ManCon or simply MR for short.

On July 24th 2012, my sister got a letter. A white envelope. The message on the back read 'this is not a circular, please do not throw away'. It said 'Atos' on the envelope. My sister thought it might be for me, as she had already had an assessment within the previous twelve months. She had just four weeks to return it. Under the Equality Act 2010, employers and services are supposed to make reasonable adjustments for disabled people - that would include filling in forms you would think. But no. They made unreasonable adjustments from six to four weeks. My sister has suffered with anxiety and agoraphobia all her adult life (similar to me, but takes different forms in each of us, although there are huge overlaps). Initially she was placed in the WRAG (Work Related Activity Group) which meant that she'd been awarded enough points to pass the Work Capability Assessment (in other words, had been found unfit for work). This group was described as the bullying group where claimants could be 'mandated' onto the highly controversial Work Programme. For some poor hapless souls in the WRAG, they were to be pressured and

RUTH AYLETT

Place and date of birth: London in 1951. Aylett teaches and researches computing at Heriot-Watt University. She is widely published including a piece in the 2019 Bread and Roses Anthology and in the *Morning Star* on the day of the 2019 General Election. Also in all sorts of magazines: *Butcher's Dog*, *Poets Republic*, *The North*, *Agenda*, and various anthologies.



Social Security

Stuck to chair
Waiting and waiting

Names are called, not yours
The shouting man strong-armed out

Your earlier heart attack is quite irrelevant
Just answer questions. We award the marks.

MICHELLE BAHARIER

is a dyslexic contemporary artist and poet, and has also expressed herself creatively in performance, sound, sculpture installation, drawing and painting. As a socially engaged artist Michelle creates projects with communities. This includes performance art, sometimes in form of walks and other public art forms. She is able to voice the extraordinary, the ordinary, the unheard and bring neglected stories and histories to life. Michelle has been part of the D.I.Y arts and squatting communities. She observes human conditions and our journey through life, interwoven with our identities and in her case, as a disabled, working-class Jewish woman. Michelle studied Fine Art at Exeter College of Art and Design, and her Post Grad was at the Slade School of Fine Art. She has exhibited in the USA, Europe and the Middle East. Her sound piece called Sedition, part of Sound moves, is in the archives of Tate Modern UK. Michelle has authored many books, arts, poetry and cooking. She won the Julian Sullivan Award at the Slade School of Fine Art where she published her first poetry book, and the NatWest Bank Award for Visual Arts. She was censored from an art exhibition run by the *Big Issue*, as her work about homelessness was seen to be too controversial. She founded the mental health charity CoolTan Arts, run by people with disabilities. CoolTan Arts published a women's poetry book, *Hysteria*, which won 27 awards, notably the 2015 GSK Impact Award. She famously started the Largctyal Shuffle walks, CoolWalks and Southwark hidden stories. She features in all the Brixton Poets pamphlets.

It is happening here and no one's acting

I am just an administrator,
 Not a murderer
 I am just acting within the rules
 I am an instrument of government
 I carry out the rules
 Because I am an instrument of government
 I am just a work coach, doing a job
 I am just one pay cheque away from a claimant
 I am just an instrument of government
 I carry out orders
 That's what I do
 Lest I lose my job
 I don't make decisions,
 I just follow orders
 It's the Case manager above me
 Protected in call centres
 A great place to hide
 It's the decision maker above them

KITTIE BELLTREE

was born in London in the 1960s. Her poetry and prose has been published in a range of journals including *Poetry Wales*, *Under The Radar*, *The Morning Star*, *The North* and in the anthology, *Cut on The Bias: stories about women and the clothes they wear* (Honno, 2010). Her debut poetry collection, *Sliced Tongue and Pearl Cufflinks* (2019) is published by Parthian. She works as a Specialist Tutor for neurodivergent students at Aberystwyth University.

Stephen Carré, 2010


That silence
it's a
racket
it's the
sound of
swinging
lead
a dead
tone
the line's
gone **he worked**
as a tele-
communications
consultant
before that
silence
it must
be
bro-ken
his head
oscillating
over a
black
hole **he**
couldn't
ans-wer
the
door or
the
telephone that
silence
it's
terminal

it promises to
reduce dependency
he lived
off
his
savings
for 2
years
before
claiming that
silence
it's the
ass-ess-or
noting no
evidence to
suggest
the client's
health
condition
due to
their
depression is
[...]
life
threatening **he**
spent
days
on
end
in the
same
room &
couldn't



leave
the house that
silence
it's a
brown
envelope
found
fit
for
work
with-out
a phone
call
with-out
contacting
his
doctor
psychiatrist
or comm-unity
mental
health nurse he
couldn't
talk
to
friends or
relatives that
silence
it's the
hermetic
space
between
medical
opinion
& the
work
capability
assessment he
committed suicide
after
they
re/jected
his appeal
that silence
it's the

DWP
flouting
the coroner's
urgent
warning they
must
obtain
medical
evidence to
prevent
future
deaths **he**
couldn't
ask for
help that
silence
it's a
criminal in-
difference
to
the lives
of 1.5 million
people when
the
government
pushed
on with-out **his**
dad says Stephen
would
still
be
alive if they'd
bothered
to
contact
his GP that
silence
it's the
poker-faced
wall
the
dead-
pan
re-verb-er-ation

the
long
hard
strug/gle

to t r y
& c o m m u n i c
a t e w i t h t h
e D W P

David Barr, 2013

They knew about it and did nothing about it [...] If we let a defective bus in the road [and it killed someone] we would be up for manslaughter; that's why these people should be taken to court

– David Barr's father, a bus driver, commenting on failures to address serious safety concerns raised over the Work Capability Assessment



A points system
A physiotherapist, a DWP decision-maker and two
Government ministers
Ignoring the red lights
Burning rubber
35 minutes to make the assessment
18 minutes to write the report
15 points to pass the test
No substantial risk
Rubber stamping
Driving his son to the edge
Anti-psychotic sedatives, sleeping tablets
antidepressants and a history of mental distress
Found
Fit
For
Work
Ignoring the red lights
He got a bus to the bridge, walked to the middle and jumped

Phillipa Day, 2019

She was told to claim P.I.P. because her D.L.A. was due to stop

And they lost her forms

She told them she had diabetes, unstable personality disorder, depression, anxiety and agoraphobia

And they stopped her benefits

She was told she must make a new claim

And they would not reinstate her payments

She told them she was *literally starving and cold*

And they said they'd heard it all before

She told them she was *£5000 in debt*

And they said she'd been sobbing during the call

She told them she *literally cannot leave the house*

And they rejected her plea for an at-home assessment

She told them she *genuinely can't survive like this for much longer*

And they did nothing

She was found unconscious next to a letter from the DWP

And they told her she must attend a benefits assessment

She was in a coma for ten weeks

And then she died



PENNY BLACKBURN

was born in West Yorkshire in 1970, although she has lived in the North East for over 25 years. She works in a further education college, teaching young adults with learning difficulties and behavioural problems, many of whom experience huge barriers in accessing benefits and support. She has been published widely, including online with *Riggwelter*, *Atrium* and *Ink*, *Sweat and Tears* and also in print with *Poetry Society News*, *Broken Spine* and *Fly on the Wall*. She has pamphlets coming out in spring 2021 with Yaffle and Wild Pressed Books.

Jumping Through Hoops



Each significant piece of information
must be accurately placed
within the correct, identified box
of the specified form
– available Wednesdays, bi-weekly,
when the moon reaches the nadir.

Forms must be brought in person
to our top floor office (no lift)
3 miles from the nearest road or rail link,
open every 5th Friday (mornings only).
Come no earlier or later,
for such untimely supplications will be refused,
returned unread.

Should your form be accepted
your application will be considered
by uninterested, sorry – disinterested staff,
thoroughly trained to ignore
the individual circumstances of your case.

Any dispute on decisions must be made
via official recorded complaint.
Most certainly not via Facebook, or tweeted.

You will receive a reply within our scheduled number of target
days.

At which point your request
will be most carefully
deleted.

SARA BOYCE

Sara Boyce is from Donegal but lives in Belfast. Her poems have appeared in publications including *Between Light and the Half Light* (2015) two CAP anthologies, *North West Words* (2019) and *Other Language* (2020). She had a poem long-listed for the Seamus Heaney Award for New Writing (2018).

Brown Envelope Culture

Nestled in that bowl
between Divis and the Craiganlet Hills,
Belfast's citizens are more divided than ever.

Words still evoke visceral reactions,
Now though, mantras have been replaced
by the more mundane.

Ditchwater dull words
like 'brown envelope'
trigger a gut response:

Belfast Citizen One:
tummy flips,
heart flutters,
head pounds,
blood crashes
through your arteries,
glands go into overdrive;
saliva and sweat.

The sound of your gate creaking,
of the soft swish of the letterbox brush,
of something settling on your doormat,
all fill you with dread.

You finger the thin envelope
flip the kettle on and light a fag,
try not to think the worst;
Sundays are the best days
when there is no post.

HOLLY CONANT

BORN Leeds 22/12/91. She has just had her first poem accepted by poetryandcovid.com, which is due to be published later this month. She is a student at the University of Leeds and a single parent. She is currently being treated for autoimmune related issues and MH needs. This poem is about coming to terms with her neurodiversity, which has begun to happen through the process of shielding.

A Door



opens on both sides but I
have no hands, no fingers to
grasp the notion of a handle. I
experience *a priori*. Your side
has a window. Mine
has a slate board which I
bang my head
against.

A letterbox posts through both sides.
If I post a letter this is the wrong
way, or at least, no-one else
understands. But I
am expected to act on orders with
a standard header, sanctioned by
someone who has spelt my
name wrong.

A peep-hole works on one side. I
search. I try to observe the
difference to make sense
of everyone else, but logic has no place
through this looking glass. The
world is obtuse and I
cannot see beyond the
postman's uniform.

The door is locked on both sides. It has no
keyhole.