

13th September 2014

Andrew Turner
Member of Parliament
Isle of Wight Constituency
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Newport
Isle of Wight
PO30 2QR

Dear Andrew,

I write further to our recent exchanges via Twitter on the subject of your support for the 'under occupancy charge' (the 'bedroom tax').

It is quite clear that the House of Commons has changed its view on the matter of the bedroom tax, evidenced by the vote on 5th September where the government was defeated by a large majority (and even a large number of your Conservative colleagues absented themselves).

As a result of your support for this measure, even already hard-pressed students are forced to pay an average £14 a week for one extra bedroom and £25 for two or more. Labour has pledged to scrap the bedroom tax after the next election because it believes that the tax is inherently unfair and is focussed upon those in society who can least afford to pay. Even those who are willing to move have been unable to do so because of the lack of local authority one and two-bedroom homes and it is proving next to impossible for those affected to downsize; indeed a DWP report recently said that only one in 20 claimants affected by the charge had downsized.

In our exchange you challenged me on costs. Even Esther McVey has admitted that the tax 'was never all about saving money' and the DWP have reduced its estimated projected saving from £500m to £360m. If it's not about saving money, then what is it about?

There are other factors to be considered:

1. Tenants have to move to smaller but more expensive housing in the private sector and will have to claim more housing benefit - social housing providers in Wigan with no spare 2 and 1 bedroom dwellings predict a rise in housing benefit bill by £500,000 in this town alone – one resident claims she was quoted (in Southampton) £365 for social 3 bed £664 for private 2 bed
2. The cost of adapting properties for disabled people (2/3 of those affected have a disability) so there will be less money for new housing and energy saving.

3. Effects of the tax and also the number of house not built because of (2) has led to large increases in homelessness and so expensive temporary accommodation.
4. Increase in rental arrears is already well documented, as are losses to social landlords and cost of trying to recover the money
5. Chancellor admitted in the budget that the housing benefit bill will be £1bn more than anticipated
6. There are substantial consequential costs of social disruption (e.g. children moving school), increased level of debt, increasing use of food banks etc.

In my estimation the points above, even taken on their own, make a very compelling argument for the repeal of the bedroom tax. The evidence that it is saving billions of pounds of taxpayers' money is flimsy at the very least.

There is also growing evidence of the human misery being caused as a direct result of the bedroom tax. Take the sad case of Grandmother Stephanie Bottrill who killed herself by stepping in front of a lorry on the M6 when faced with eviction from her council house in Solihull. She was at her wits end because she could not afford to pay the extra £20 per week demanded of her. It was later established that she had been wrongly assessed because of a DWP mistake. This tragic case is only one of the realities of untold misery caused as a direct result of the bedroom tax.

I know that you frown upon statistics, Andrew, (perhaps because they show a picture with which you and the government disagree) but here are some more:

- 6 out of every 10 of the 523,000 victims (so far) have been unable to meet shortfalls in the extra rent they are asked to pay.
- One in five housing benefit claimants has asked to downsize – but only 4.5 per cent have been able to find smaller homes.
- More than a third of victims received formal warning letters of eviction.

In conclusion, the bedroom tax is cruel, it is unfair, pernicious and inequitable. I know from my own experience on the doorsteps of Islanders how much this tax is detrimentally affecting some peoples' lives and is causing real misery. It is simply unfair.

Labour will pay for the repeal by, among other things, reversing the £150m tax cut for hedge funds announced in the 2013 Budget. We will abolish George Osborne's 'shares for rights' scheme, which businesses have been using to avoid capital gains tax (shares sold at a profit are exempt) and which the OBR has forecast could cost up to £1bn. We will prevent construction firms avoiding tax by falsely listing workers as self-employed.

As is my usual practise I will release this letter to local media.

Yours sincerely,



Stewart Blackmore