

Keep Calm and Carry On: Challenging a Discourse of Necessity and Forbearance in News Reporting of UK 'Austerity' Policies

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Introduction: Austerity in the UK

In 2018, following a two-week fact-finding mission, Philip Alston, the UN's rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, reported stark figures for poverty in the UK: "14 million people, a fifth of the population, live in poverty. Four million of these are more than 50% below the poverty line, and 1.5 million are destitute, unable to afford basic essentials" (Alston, 2018, p. 1). Alston attributes this prevalence, not solely but substantially, to a policy agenda pursued by successive Conservative or Conservative-led governments¹, that cut £39bn from welfare spending (Crawford & Zaranko, 2019, p. 2) and reformed the benefits system, ostensibly to 'make work pay'.

These cuts were part of a wider contraction of public spending in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis that the conservative media labelled 'austerity' to evoke post-war necessity and a much marketed 'keep calm and carry on' spirit of British forbearance. Meanwhile, the government discursively shifted blame for the economic slowdown from high-stakes gambling in the financial sector to overspending by a profligate Labour government (Clarke & Newman, 2012; Fairclough, 2016), an account that was reproduced largely uncritically in the early news reporting (Berry, 2016; Grundmann, Kreischer, & Scott, 2017).

However, critics, including anti-austerity protesters and the wider social justice movement, disputed the discourse of necessity and argued that the reforms were ideological. As well as a small-state ideology, welfare reforms were based on an assumption that benefit recipients were 'scroungers' who needed disciplining to force them into work (Fairclough, 2016). As Alston remarked:

British compassion for those who are suffering has been replaced by a punitive, mean-spirited, and often callous approach apparently designed to instill discipline where it is least useful, to impose a rigid order on the lives of those least capable of coping with today's world, and elevating the goal of enforcing blind compliance over a genuine concern to improve the well-being of those at the lowest levels of British society. (Alston, 2018, p. 3)

Although politicians and journalists alike assumed public opinion to be unsympathetic to those on benefits, in keeping with dominant news framing that stereotypes benefits claimants as lazy, profligate and caught in a culture of dependency (as explored elsewhere in this volume and also in Hancock, 2004; Harper, 2014; Lens, 2002), there was growing recognition that the wider austerity agenda was becoming unpopular. Protesters attempted to leverage that skepticism to mobilize a broad public opposition to cuts and succeeded in attracting

¹ Initially the Conservatives entered power in coalition with the Liberal Democrats, a broadly centrist party (2010-15), then ruled with a slim but eroding majority (2015-17), before trying to strengthen their mandate with a snap election in which they lost their majority and continued in government with the support of the Northern Irish Democratic Unionist Party (2017-19), leading to another snap election in 2019 where they succeeded in returning to majority rule.

significant media attention. In 2015, an anti-austerity agenda entered formal politics with the election of left-winger Jeremy Corbyn to the leadership of the Labour Party, but this failed to cut through at the ballot box in two successive snap general elections. Although the Conservative government has announced the end of austerity at least three times – in October 2018 (Kentish, 2018), September 2019 (Merrick, 2019), and March 2020 (Wren-Lewis, 2020), at the time of writing the cuts to benefits have still not been reversed.

This chapter explores the ways in which the British news media reported the policy changes that constitute this austerity agenda, and the extent to which critics were able to influence news framing over a decade of public spending cuts. It pays particular attention to the limited presence of those most affected by the cuts – those in poverty and dependent on public services and benefits. The following sections will each address a distinct stage in the development of the framing of austerity from its origins in 2009 when the Conservatives developed the policy in opposition. It draws on a series of framing and content analysis² studies that together represent a sustained program of research into the role of civil society and minority media practices in challenging austerity discourses and policies.

The first of these time periods runs from 2009 to 2012, and was a period of discursive contest over austerity as a policy in the abstract. The details of the Welfare Reform Bill were very lightly scrutinized in the media prior to being passed in 2012. Reporting focused largely on amendments forced by the House of Lords, the unelected second chamber of the UK Parliament, in a frame of political conflict rather than policy substance. Opposition during this period included the transnational Occupy movement and a British movement called UK Uncut. In this section I draw on my earlier research on the media framing of civil society and its role at a time of crisis and upheaval (Birks, 2016) and more longitudinal study on the influence of social movements on political discourse and news framing (Birks, 2017b).

During the second time period, 2013-14, the impact of the cuts had started to be felt and the Welfare Act 2012 was coming into force. Connectedly, attention to the term ‘austerity’ in UK broadsheets peaked in 2013 though it declined again in 2014 (Grundmann et al., 2017: 104). In this section I focus on opposition to one specific element of the Welfare Act 2012, a penalty on housing benefit claimants in social housing deemed to be ‘under-occupying’ their home, popularly called the Bedroom Tax. This analysis draws on a content analysis of two left-leaning tabloids’ campaigns against the policy (Birks, 2017a).

Over the five years of 2015-2019, the UK had no fewer than three general elections, the first scheduled by the Fixed Term Parliament Act 2011, the following two called as ‘snap’ elections (in 2017 in line with the terms of the Act – a two-thirds majority in favor, and in 2019 using additional legislation, the Early Parliamentary General Election Act 2019). After defeat in 2015, the Labour Party moved significantly to the left after grassroots party members elected

² These separate pieces of research each involved substantial samples of newspaper articles gathered from Nexis, as well as other documentation such as UK Uncut press releases, and coded in NVivo qualitative analysis software to draw out key themes and angles, allowing close attention to specific discursive construction whilst also contextualising them within overall patterns of reporting.

the socialist backbencher, Jeremy Corbyn as leader. The data for this period was initially gathered for a study on fact-checking journalism (Birks, 2019), and is the subject of current research.

2009-2012: Discursive contestation

When the global financial crisis hit in 2008, it initially highlighted the inherent flaws in unregulated globalized neoliberal capitalism, especially the high stakes gambling of hedge funds and derivatives, and then then Labour Prime Minister, Gordon Brown spearheaded a global resurgence in Keynesian economics (Burton, 2016). However, neoliberal economists, financiers and politicians succeeded in an ingenious discursive sleight of hand that transformed the financial crisis into a fiscal crisis (Clarke & Newman, 2012). Having previously felt obliged to pledge to match the Labour government's spending plans, the Conservative party capitalized on the emergence of the sustainability of the deficit as "the big media story" in early 2009 (Burton, 2016: 73). Labour proposed plans to reduce borrowing in the long term, but argued for a delay to spending cuts until economic recovery was underway, whilst opposition leaders positioned the Conservatives as the only party who could be trusted to make the 'hard choices' necessary to get borrowing under control (Burton, 2016: 74). After taking a strong lead, the Conservative Party failed to secure an outright majority in the 2010 election and formed a coalition government with the centrist Liberal Democrats. The latter had argued for delaying cuts, but nonetheless signed up to the Conservative austerity measures in the coalition agreement, though their compromises in government would later cost them dearly in votes at the next election.

The news media largely accepted the economic argument for 'expansionary fiscal contraction – that is to say growth during a period of spending cuts, by stimulating 'market confidence – as plausible, not least because political and financial elites were the dominant sources (Berry, 2016), though some, largely in the left-liberal Guardian newspaper, did air challenges on the grounds that it had not worked elsewhere (Fairclough, 2016). One corpus discourse analysis study (Grundmann et al., 2017: 123) found that the print media extensively reproduced the Tory narrative that Labour were the cause of the fiscal crisis, and although 'anti' was the third most common collocated term to 'austerity', the Labour opposition were ascribed a role "reacting instead of providing alternatives" and "phrases such as 'undermining claims by Labour' or 'despite claims by Labour' indicate that their claims are rebutted or not taken seriously" (Grundmann et al., 2017: 123).

According to opinion-tracker polling by YouGov (2017), public opinion was relatively, though not overwhelmingly, acquiescent over this period. The proportion who thought some public spending cuts were necessary remained relatively stable at around 50-55%, with 25-35% deeming them unnecessary. Interestingly, however, this question was not even asked until 2011, such was the dominant assumption of consensus in favor of deficit reduction. However, from the outset there was a question over how fairly the cuts were being implemented, and the proportion perceiving them as *unfair* steadily increased over 2010, from a third in June to over half by September, peaking in 2012.

UK Uncut formed in October 2010 at an apposite time to harness this growing disquiet about the way that cuts were targeted at people most dependent on public services and benefits. The Occupy movement launched transnationally a year later, in October 2011, including an encampment outside St Paul's Cathedral in London. Both protests attracted media attention for their novel aspects – whilst occupation was a well-established tactic in the repertoire of contentious politics, these were among the first and most prominent movements spread virally via Twitter hashtags and other online mobilization. They were also very visible, both geographically and through online self-mediation, and employed public relations tactics to gain news media coverage (Birks, 2016, 2017b).

Although neither Occupy nor UK Uncut directly challenged the economic argument for 'expansionary fiscal contraction', a crucial part of their discourse of unfairness involved challenging the government (and right-wing press) framing of blame. As Isabela Fairclough identifies in her political discourse analysis of austerity reporting, the dominant framing was that "the crisis was caused by excessive consumption, living on borrowed money and by irresponsible state spending on a welfare system that rewards only those who prefer 'wallowing in state-sponsored idleness' (Randall, 2010, in the Daily Telegraph)" (Fairclough, 2016: 62).

The anti-cuts movements therefore reminded people that it was the government's bail-out of banks close to financial collapse that had put pressure on the public purse. They argued that spending cuts were not a practical necessity but an ideological choice, and punished blameless ordinary people whilst letting the banks off the hook. Furthermore, this identification of blame allowed UK Uncut to offer a practical counter-proposal to austerity that would make the irresponsible corporations pay – a crackdown on tax avoidance. The banks' culpability allowed protesters to disturb the dominant neoliberal framing of business interests as broadly synonymous with the public interest, as the providers of economic growth and jobs, and to highlight other ways in which corporations failed to contribute to the public good, by avoiding paying their 'fair share' through taxation. This argument also, of course, had the virtue of sidestepping the argument about whether the deficit was in fact unsustainable in the medium term.

Both UK Uncut and Occupy, therefore, either specifically or in more general terms, challenged the necessity and inevitability of cuts, and located that argument in a broader assertion about culpability and fairness. However, whilst they noted that the people who stood to suffer most from the cuts were those already in or on the edge of poverty, they emphasized the impact across society. For Occupy, austerity pitted 99% of the population against a super-rich 1%; for UK Uncut 'ordinary people' were being treated unfairly in comparison with multinational corporations and wealthy individuals, who were being allowed to get away with dodging their obligations to public finances through tax avoidance.

There are clearly strategic advantages to drawing the socio-economic dividing lines in such a way as to inspire solidarity and gloss over difference, but in practice the £30bn discretionary public spending cuts announced in 2010 for the period to 2014/15 disproportionately

affected the poor. Whilst public services that are used and valued by the middle classes – health and education – were ringfenced, over a third of cuts were to be taken directly from welfare spending (Burton, 2016: 86). There were also significant cuts to local government, which delivers social care and social housing, among other things.

For middle class activists to focus on the suffering of socially distant others as a motivation for their political advocacy is a difficult task, however. Their task can be understood as moral witnessing, which is central to the interpretive aspects of political contestation, as it highlights why the issue is significant, and can engage a wider public in sympathy and outrage. However, This is often framed in media reporting as either disingenuous or sanctimonious, and in either case as an inauthentic representation of the lived experience of poverty (Birks, 2016). Peters argues that victim-witnesses have a particular “prestige” in moral witnessing (2011, p. 31), and Ashuri and Pinchevski concur that “being a victim may count as a resource, a form of capital in producing testimony” (2011, p. 138). That testimony will often have an emotional component, to report how the witness was personally affected by the event or situation (Ashuri & Pinchevski, 2011, p. 143). By contrast, a claim to witness suffering at a distance, as a response to stories in the media, is considered the “hardest to sustain” (Peters, 2011, p. 38).

Although their own testimony as moral witnesses may be deemed questionable, when writing press releases activists also act as mediators, who have the power to “determine who qualifies as a witness” (Ashuri & Pinchevski, 2011, p. 139) based on their own codes of moral legitimacy, though in press releases of course that power is limited since journalists still operate as gatekeepers. Journalists’ criteria for a ‘good victim’ stipulate that they “cannot be seen as capable of helping themselves, but have the possibility of receiving help from others who act as ‘dramatic partners’ in rescue bids” (Langer, 1992, p. 116), trapping them in a depoliticized role as beneficiaries of pity and charity. UK Uncut struggled to negotiate this pitfall in the press releases.

At the outset, UK Uncut contended that the government's public spending cuts disproportionately affected "the poorest and most vulnerable" (in five press releases over the first five months), a phrase they also used in press interviews. However, UK Uncut soon had misgivings about this way of speaking for people dependent on benefits.

I think to be honest at first we went about that in the wrong way – we always used this line which was ‘the poorest and most vulnerable are being made to pay for a financial crisis caused by the super-rich’ and when we started working with DPAC [Disabled People Against the Cuts], very early on they said to us, hang on a second, don’t refer to us as vulnerable. That just plays into the same stereotypes. So it’s been a learning curve for us. But we’re certainly trying to challenge this idea that anyone who receives benefits is somehow undeserving. (‘Jo’, UK Uncut, interview November 2014)

Increasingly, then, UK Uncut press releases attributed agency to those affected by the cuts, particularly in initiating protest, largely in quotes from UK Uncut activists highlighting DPAC’s work – “The action has been organized by people directly affected by the Welfare Reform Bill” and “I am excited to support such a strong campaign, that has been led by disabled people for many months and that is essential for all of us” (Cheryl Thompson, quoted in UK Uncut press release, January 28, 2012).

DPAC members were also quoted, making a reasoned argument about benefit cuts being

counterproductive (increasing NHS costs), and bearing witness to the meagre amount disabled people in London would have to live on (UK Uncut press release, January 27, 2012). However, this was delivered in an authoritative voice, without evocative detail about what it is like to live on so little. So disability advocacy groups were accorded cognitive authority to speak about the effect on disabled people as experts, but they did not share their personal witness testimony in a way that might be more compelling for the audience (Ashuri and Pinchevski, 2011, p. 136).

This was a conscious dilemma for UK Uncut, since “you’d like to try to move beyond the level of debate that is established by the likes of the *Mail* and *The Sun* and certain politicians, but to a certain extent you also have to engage with it, so it’s a difficult one to do” (‘Jo’, interview November 2014). This recognizes that activists are marginal actors who cannot easily operate as primary definers, but must locate their message within the dominant narrative whilst simultaneously trying to disrupt it. However, they denied themselves the means to make a credible claim of moral witnessing by drawing on the more visceral narratives of austerity – perhaps because they associated human interest stories with tabloid framing, or because they were concerned that this would compromise their authority.

In the conservative media coverage, even UK Uncut’s acts of solidarity with affected protest groups like DPAC were cast as suspicious. A news article in *The Times*, for instance, was disparaging of such collaboration as self-interested, not in material terms (which is deemed more acceptable, as long as it reflects middle class interests such as tax), but politically strategic instrumentalization.

In a strategy designed to bring maximum disruption to London and other cities, the organisers are also planning to widen the scope of their protests to attract anyone affected by the Government’s cuts to take to the streets. [...] Police are trying to identify the ringleaders who are planning to “cash in” on the anticipated feeling of discontent next year as the austerity budget begins to take effect. (December 18, 2010)

This suggests that protesters are manipulating those with authentic resentment of the cuts, based in personal experience and interest, in order to achieve their own political or ideological goals, or because they “just want to make trouble” (Jan Moir, *Daily Mail* April 04 2011), rather than standing alongside those affected by cuts to help them fight the policy.

Ultimately, however, the conservative press took the sting out of UK Uncut’s argument by appropriating its message of fairness, but reorienting it as fairness to *taxpayers*, and eliminating any concern about welfare cuts from the anti-tax avoidance cause (Birks, 2017b).

2013-14: Witness testimony

By 2013, the cuts had started to take hold and their effects felt. At this point there was greater scope for the testimony of victim-witnesses that could challenge the stereotypes of welfare dependency, but these emerged most forcefully from an unexpected source – the tabloid press. Two left-leaning tabloid newspapers, the *Daily Mirror* and *The People*, launched campaigns in opposition to a specific cut to housing benefit that had just been introduced as part of the Welfare Reform Act 2012, popularly called the ‘Bedroom Tax’. This imposed deductions to housing benefit payments if a claimant’s family were deemed to be ‘underoccupying’ a house that was larger they required. They were penalized 14% of housing

benefit for one 'spare' room and 25% for two or more. A bedroom would be designated 'spare' if young children each had a room of their own rather than sharing.

In contrast to UK Uncut's moral witnessing, in the tabloid campaigns personal testimony was prominent from the outset. Overall, a quarter of the campaign articles included at least one personal story and victim-witnesses were quoted in over two-thirds of these. Most commonly they attested to individual circumstances where a 'spare' room was actually needed (for instance, for children serving in the armed forces, or for medical equipment such as dialysis), or where forcing the family to move house would have unintended consequences (such as loss of informal childcare and other support networks). These stories demonstrated that the policy was flawed because it did not take into account certain circumstances. However, the limitation of those challenges is that they could be addressed by exceptions for those deemed 'deserving' cases, whilst leaving the policy intact.

To pose a more radical political challenge, the campaigns would have to challenge some of more substantial assumptions underpinning the policy. And in fact the campaigns did do this almost as often as highlighting deserving cases. These stories raised more universal practical problems, such as the structural problems with a rental market in which social housing has been sold off and not replaced, an exploitative and expensive private rental sector, and with demand increasing as middle class millennials are increasingly priced out of home ownership. Furthermore, the notion that social housing renters were 'underoccupying' the available stock by having spare bedrooms assumes that there were smaller properties for those people to move into, but these stories revealed that there was a shortage of smaller, one or two bedroom properties.

In a still more progressive use of personal narratives, a significant minority of campaign articles (16%) explicitly challenged stereotypes of benefit claimants as scroungers, including quotes from the working poor, such as a pub barmaid who "has worked all her life – and still does" (*People*, March 17, 2013). Stories of redundancy and failed business ventures framed benefits as a safety net for people who were economically active and even (neoliberally valorized) entrepreneurial risk-takers, rather than part of an imagined underclass of intergenerational worklessness. Stereotypes of 'wealth without work' or profligacy among benefits recipients were challenged with accounts of people suffering miserable existences without the distraction of even a TV, and being left with stark choices of heating or eating.

Three in 10 campaign articles used emotional language to engage audiences in the lived reality of people's experiences, the majority of which related to anxiety, fear, misery and despair, but also anger at the injustice of the policy and frustration at Kafkaesque bureaucratic decision-making. A notable example of the latter was to have been given funding for an extension to provide a disabled child a necessary downstairs bedroom with a hoist, only to later be penalized when that same room was designated 'spare' because he was at an age where the policy decreed he should share with his sibling. In eight in ten cases where victim-witnesses were quoted they explicitly criticized the policy, avoiding the passive 'good victim' trope in which they are stripped of political agency. Whilst they were frequently

described as vulnerable (105 times in all), these victims demanded solidarity rather than pity or charity.

One significant limitation, however, was that the newspapers preferred to position themselves as the champion of those affected rather than to report protests and advocacy by groups such as Disabled People Against the Cuts (DPAC). An exception to this was campaigning columnist Ros Wynne-Jones, who not only promoted a union-organized protest, but also took some of those victim-witnesses whose stories had featured in her column to the Labour conference and to the House of Commons. She made a strong claim for the effectiveness of “the human stories behind austerity”, and conveyed the disgust of those affected by politicians’ decision-making at their refusal to engage with arguments they considered too emotional and populist.

However, despite the efforts of Wynne-Jones and some other Mirror columnists, overall only 29 of the total 473 articles – just 6% – related the Bedroom Tax to wider welfare reform, and over two-thirds of those argued that welfare reform more broadly was necessary, framing the Bedroom Tax as an exception to an established consensus that a more punitive benefits system would be more fair to taxpayers. This was also reflected in public opinion polling, which suggested that people were sympathetic to vulnerable groups, with 87% supporting the statement “Tenants in social housing who need a spare bedroom for sick or disabled family members should be exempt from the ‘Bedroom Tax’” (ComRes, 2013). However, the personal stories of benefits recipients did not appear to have undermined broader stereotypes of welfare dependency and profligacy, with two-thirds also agreeing that the welfare system was broken.

2015-19: Anti-austerity politics to the fore?

At the time of the 2015 election, the proportion of the public telling pollsters that they thought the cuts were being implemented fairly was the highest since November 2010, but was still no more than a third (YouGov, 2017). Labour performed worse than expected and the Conservatives returned to power with a majority, dispensing with their coalition partners, whose vote suffered drastically from their time in office.

In June 2015, Jeremy Corbyn announced he would stand as a candidate for the Labour leadership on an explicitly anti-austerity platform (BBC News, 2015a), and attended and addressed a rally organized by the People’s Assembly Against Austerity (BBC News, 2015b). Grundmann et al. (2017: 124-5) suggested that “This public stance and form of challenger discourse may in part have helped Corbyn to become elected as the Labour leader.” Subsequently the proportion that thought austerity fair declined through late 2015 to just 19% in March 2016, though shifting toward uncertainty rather than opposition, and by 2017 that uncertainty seemed to have spread to those who thought the cuts were *unfairly* distributed (YouGov, 2017).

The Labour manifesto in both 2017 and 2019 pledged an end to austerity and billions of pounds of spending on public services, including scrapping the Bedroom Tax. The 2017 manifesto section on social security opened with a damning account of increasing poverty under Conservative government.

Poverty in Britain is rising due to the Conservatives' attempts to balance the books on the backs of the poorest. They have slashed social security over the last seven years, leaving more people in poverty, subject to a punitive sanctions regime, and reliant on food banks. (Labour Party, 2017a)

Anticipating that critics would accuse them of proposing unaffordable policies, Labour also published a costing document detailing their tax-raising and spending plans. Of £48.6bn in spending commitments, £4bn related to social security, including increasing disability benefits for those who were taking steps to move into work, but half this sum was earmarked to fund a 'review' into Universal Credit (Labour Party, 2017b: 56). This subsection on working-age benefits (after another on pensions) was subtitled 'dignity for those who cannot work', emphasizing the focus on the disabled and their carers rather than the unemployed and low paid that make up the bulk of 'the poorest' hit by austerity.

These modest pledges were given little attention in news coverage (Centre for Research in Communication and Culture, 2017), with the greatest attention paid to Brexit (largely in the pro-Brexit press) and policing and security (with two terrorist attacks during the campaign). Social security as a whole was placed sixth (or seventh including process, 'horse-race' reporting) the bulk of which related to a Conservative proposal on state pensions. In a sample of the flagship broadcast coverage by the BBC (Radio 4's three-hour long *Today* program – 81 items) and Channel 4 (the hour-long 7pm bulletin – 99 items) over the course of the campaign, there was only one item from each broadcaster that directly addressed the issue of poverty.

Channel 4 News (June 7, 2017) reported an assertion attributed to Academics Stand Against Poverty, that poverty was 'neglected' in party manifestos. The pre-recorded report included interviews with people in North Tyneside who had experienced poverty, including one woman then running a food bank, talking about their struggles, their distrust in politicians, and refusal to vote. Although the interviews gave voice to their concerns – including the complex reasons why they used food banks, and testimony of working long hours for low pay challenging the political assertion that work is the route out of poverty – the main focus was on their political distrust and disengagement, rather than the different the manifesto proposals would make to their lives.

The item on BBC Radio 4 *Today* (June 1, 2017) formed part of a theme for the day of the 'cost of living', about the real terms erosion of wages and rising personal debt, and also prominently featured food bank use. Again, there was an emphasis on the reasons people have for using food banks, including those in work – "issues such stagnating wages, insecure employment, are often resulting in people *having* to turn to food banks even if they are working" including a social worker – that this is endemic poverty, not a cash flow problem. Whilst this attempts to challenge some of the political (and media) discourse around poverty,

it goes no further than that, and again fails to connect the issue to political decision-making (beyond a passing reference to the waiting time for Universal Credit payments) much less manifesto policy proposals.

These items seem to start and end with the assumed prejudices of the audience, to establish the existence of poverty, rather than seeing tackling those prejudices as the first step to engaging them in the implications of policy proposals for tackling that poverty. The reports are not overly sentimental and do not seek to elicit pity, but neither do they inspire solidarity. In neither case do they presume to have anything to say to people *in* poverty about their political choices.

When the second snap election was called in 2019, substantive policy issues were subsumed under the process-related issue of a rancorous parliamentary deadlock on leaving the EU. The Conservatives ran on a slogan of 'Get Brexit Done', to capitalize on public exhaustion with the issue, and this made it even harder for Labour's anti-austerity message to break through. Social security slipped to 12th (substantive policy issue) in terms of coverage – 2% of election items (Deacon et al., 2019), and Labour's manifesto was again addressed overwhelmingly in terms of the tax-raising and costing aspects, rather than the policy substance of investment in public services and alleviating poverty.

Conclusion

Over the course of a decade of austerity policies, the dominant framing in news reporting has shifted, alongside public opinion to some extent, aided by the campaigning advocacy of social movements and the few left-leaning newspapers. There was little challenge outside the pages of the left-liberal Guardian to the claim that the financial crisis was really a fiscal crisis, and that cuts to public spending and investment could heal the damage to the economy from globalized neoliberal capitalism by boosting market 'confidence', even when 'expansionary fiscal contraction' failed to bring a return to growth and was quietly abandoned. However, in the absence of party-political opposition, a challenge came from anti-cuts protest movements that succeeded in getting media attention.

Nonetheless, as middle-class activists, they struggled to articulate the impact of the cuts on people in poverty. On the one hand, their initial efforts mirrored to closely the dominant news discourses of deserving victims as vulnerable and passive in order to distance them from the demonized stereotypical welfare benefits claimant, and in any case had these claims on behalf of a socially distant other dismissed by journalists as inauthentic. On the other hand, they sought mainstream support by appealing to middle class concerns about cuts to universal public services such as the NHS, neglecting the severe impact on those who could least afford to have support from the public purse cut. This allowed the conservative press to discursively shift the ground of anti-tax avoidance to one of fairness to taxpayers – with concern only for those who are economically active. Surprisingly, it was left-wing popular tabloids did better at giving those in poverty a voice to bear witness to the impact on cuts on their lives, and to challenge stereotypes more than distance themselves from the 'feckless' poor.

The impact of these discourses and counter-discourses on poverty and social security policy is complex, but two snap elections contested by a Labour party that had shifted to the left and advanced a radical anti-austerity, tax and spend manifesto failed to unseat the Conservative government that imposed austerity policies. Again, campaigning focused on middle class concerns, amongst assumptions that benefits increases for the poor was not a popular policy position. Cammaerts (2018, p. 160) found that focus group participants reproduced the discourses of the anti-austerity protesters about the wealthy elite but also 'poor-bashing' discourses of the right-wing press. In the case of the elections, however, the issue was not negative framing, but neglect of the issue of poverty and social security altogether, in favor of picking at Labour's costings and 'getting Brexit done'. When it comes to the crunch of election priorities, poverty remains low on the mainstream agenda, and the voices of the poor, even when amplified, are safely ignored, their resulting political disengagement from formal politics reported as immutable fact.

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