

REAL BRITAIN

Ros Wynne-Jones standing up for you and your family

WHY WE ARE STUCK WITH THE IDS MESS

We hoped. We dreamed. But the reshuffle came and went and - despite the night of the longest Tory knives - Iain Duncan Smith remains unscathed.



David Cameron really had no choice. There was no one capable of inheriting the utter shambles of the Department for Work and Pensions and doing anything about it in time. IDS is like a stain on the carpet no one knows how to remove.

Meanwhile, the DWP quietly gave ATOS a £10million contract to continue carrying out the IT on its healthcare assessments.

Some might feel there's no justice at all in this world.

LIVING FUND FURY

In recent days, activists from Disabled People Against Cuts twice occupied parts of Westminster - the grounds of the Abbey, and part of Victoria Street - in a bid to save the Independent Living Fund.

This is a sign of the increasing desperation disabled people feel as the funds they rely on are snatched from them. Unless the Government starts listening, a summer of discontent is on the cards.

VOTE AND BE HEARD

On Monday, the Daily Mirror launched #NoVoteNoVoice, a massive drive to get a million more people registered to vote in time for the general election. You can use our website to check if you're registered, to sign up in under five minutes, or just to support the campaign. A million people voted for Sam Bailey in the X Factor final. Now we need a million voters to change the political landscape. Go to vote.mirror.co.uk

WEBSITE OF THE WEEK

dwpunspun.org.uk

Everything the DWP doesn't want you to know about welfare and benefits. Brilliant new website from False Economy campaigners.

In a week that's also seen Katie "closest thing to hazy - about my tax arrangements" Melua apologising for tax avoidance, Nando's is the latest big food chain to come under fire over tax.

The perfectly legal move - involving offshore tax havens - helps the firm to cut its UK corporation tax bill by up to a third. Which has left the Nando's PR team, to quote its chilli menu, "tackling a ferociously fiery dragon in a furnace".



Out on the street: Victims of the broken safety net

SAMANTHA Skinner is packing her life away into boxes because at the weekend the bailiffs will come.

Her flat in her home town of Tunbridge Wells, Kent, has been a refuge for the past two years.

Diagnosed with multiple sclerosis while on maternity leave, Samantha's relationship fell apart under the strain, leaving her a disabled single mum.

"This flat has been a safe place for me to bring up my son Max," says Samantha, 28. "But now we're being kicked out and we've got nowhere to go."

Samantha's landlord fell behind with his mortgage payments and now she and Max, two, are being evicted. But because they are on housing benefit they can't find anywhere to go.

"It seems as if no one wants a housing benefit tenant, even if you've got a guarantor," says Samantha, who gave up work as a XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX because of her MS.

"Once they find out you're on housing benefit most estate agents don't even ring you back."

Statistics from the charity Shelter show Samantha is right. "Our research has found that half of landlords have a policy of not letting to people on Local Housing Allowance or Housing Benefit, and a further 18% say they occasionally do, but prefer not to," its report on the private rented sector says.

It is less than three weeks since Housing Minister Kris Hopkins told Panorama it's "perfectly legitimate" for landlords to decide they don't want a tenant on Housing Benefit. His remarks, interpreted as meaning it was acceptable for landlords to evict social tenants, were described as appalling by his Labour opposite, Emma Reynolds.

In January, Judith and Fergus Wilson, who own nearly 1,000 properties near Samantha in Kent and are among the



HOMELESS
Samantha and Max with boxes

UK's biggest buy-to-let investors, revealed they had sent eviction notices to 200 tenants who received some support from the welfare state.

Fergus said: "If I am heartless all the other landlords are heartless as we're all doing the same. All landlords will tell you there is so much default now with housing benefits tenants you are better off with somebody working."

The Wilsons said they would rather have Eastern Europeans in work than British people on benefits.

The strained relationship between private landlords and housing benefit tenants is likely to come under even more pressure when Iain Duncan Smith's flagship Universal Credit comes into force.

With payments going to tenants rather than direct to landlords, there are fears that some hard-pressed families will struggle even more.

In the well-heeled spa town of Royal Tunbridge Wells - to give it its full name - social housing is in short supply. Samantha and Max face being sent an

hour's drive away to the coast to emergency hostel accommodation, far from supportive family and friends.

"In Tunbridge Wells I have family who can come and cook for me on a difficult day or help look after Max," she says.

Her MS, controlled with drugs, had been much better until recently, although she still suffered heavy fatigue.

Samantha says: "Stress is a big trigger for a relapse. Suddenly I am getting all these warning symptoms. I'm so tired I can't stay awake without medication."

"I've got sensory impairments, nerve pain and problems with balance. Sometimes it affects my eyesight. There's a pain travelling down my back like an electric shock. The left side of my face is pins and needles and burning."

Unable to find a private landlord who will take her and Max, Samantha also knows she is just one desperate name on a long list waiting for a council property. Meanwhile, she has to wait until she is officially homeless to qualify for emergency help.

As it is she has to make up the shortfall in her rent every month from her disability payments. "£775 a month is

covered by housing benefit and then I have to find another £30."

She fought to receive the Personal Independence Payment for 18 months and was even forced to appeal before eventually being awarded it.

"Two years ago I was just living my life," Samantha says. "I was working, I wasn't someone on benefits."

Then, when she was a few weeks pregnant, her foot went numb. She was tested for a stroke and eventually for MS, even having an MRI scan while pregnant. She couldn't begin treatment until after Max had been born, by which time her symptoms were accelerating.

Tunbridge Borough Council says it already does a lot to help homeless families. "The council tries to avoid homeless households having to go into emergency accommodation," a spokeswoman says. "We see it very much as a last resort, to be used when all other options have failed."

"We try to place applicants within the borough where possible but often have to seek accommodation further away, such as in Eastbourne or Hastings."

But as the gulf between renters and owners opens ever wider, the gap between social tenants and the rest of the country gaps wider still.

The two-bedroom flat Samantha has been renting has increased in value by around 5% since last year - and is worth around £200,000. She, however, is awaiting the bailiffs with a little boy who can't understand why half his life is packed up into boxes.

The social protection on housing, a key part of the welfare state, is no longer a safety net. When Samantha and Max are evicted this weekend with nowhere to go, we should all be disgusted of Tunbridge Wells.

#Madeuthink?

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Not NICE to be stereotyped

Tomorrow, a new project called NICE launches in Salford.

Sick of being called scroungers, a group of people - including community champion Fred, mother-of-two Kasia and ex-offender Ray - have teamed up to fight the stereotype, supported by both Church Action on Poverty and Oxfam.

Together, the group contribute more than 2,000 hours a month as carers, parents, volunteers and mentors. Yet austerity and welfare reform mean many of them are struggling to survive. See stigmastories.com.



MO6 CXPTION dgdgdgdgd

I've written before about the Tories' disgraceful decision to scrap the Agricultural Wages Bill - which protected low-paid farm workers in England and Wales.

Wales rebelled and voted to keep the AWB in place - but the decision was blocked by outgoing UK Attorney General Dominic Grieve. This would have meant taking at least £1million a year out of farm employees' wages in Wales alone, with many of them already very badly paid.

The Supreme Court has now ruled that Wales can protect the wages of 13,000 farm workers. A huge victory.

QUOTE OF THE WEEK

As the DWP floats the loathsome idea that people not treated for anxiety and depression should lose their benefits, MP Luciana Berger asks: "Where is the evidence 'loads of people who claim Employment and Support Allowance undergo no treatment whatsoever' because they don't want it? Is it actually because people are having to wait months on end to access talking therapies or other mental health treatment?"

Have you or your family been affected by the cuts? Or have you been shocked by how your area has been hit? I want to reveal what's really happening in the UK.

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