

Complaint:

Programme: The Future of the Welfare State with John Humphreys

Channel: BBC2

Broadcast date: 27/10/2011

This programme was biased and contained misleading statements from the very start. I wish to complain specifically on three points.

1. John Humphreys opening statement: “70 years ago a document of monumental importance sparked a social revolution, it gave birth to the welfare state and what has become a massive benefits bill. That bill has gone up in the last 10 years by nearly £60 billion.”

The above statement is misleading. Please consider the following points:

1.1 £60 billion in 10 years equals the rise in total public expenditure on welfare.

1.2 'That bill has gone up in the last 10 years' implies that the public expenditure on welfare 'has become a massive benefits bill' over a period of 10 years or more.

1.3 'has become' implies a meaningful comparison between the past and today. The only way to make a meaningful comparison over generations is to compare total public expenditure on welfare (government and local) as a % of GDP or as a % of public spending.

1.4 Total public expenditure on welfare as a % of public spending at 16% is the lowest its been post-war.

1.5 As of 2008 total public expenditure on welfare as a % of GDP was at its lowest for 40 years.

As a % of GDP, welfare spending has risen since 2008 only (Less than ten years).

1.6 The increase as % of GDP over the last 3 years is 1.36% (GDP is stagnant).

1.7 'That bill...' implies the '£60 billion' figure is exactly the same measure of welfare spending as to 'what has become a massive benefits bill'.

Source: <http://www.ukpublicspending>. If you would like a table of these figures please contact me.

We have these three alternate interpretations for the opening statement:

1.8a) It is reasonable to assume the '£60 billion' figure relates to 'has become a massive benefits bill' as Humphreys states 'That bill...' Therefore, it is reasonable to assume Humphreys is referring to total public expenditure on welfare. In which case, it is misleading to state that 'has become a massive benefits bill', as total public expenditure on welfare has not increased over the decades.

1.8b) The only increase recently has been as a 1.36% of GDP since 2008. If Humphreys meant this three year increase as 'become a massive benefits bill' then it is misleading because 'has gone up in the last 10 years' implies the increase has happened over 10 years or more.

1.8c) If Humphreys is not referring to total public expenditure on welfare, then it is misleading to use the '£60 billion' figure. It is also misleading to not declare which subsection of the welfare spending Humphreys is referring to.

Either of the three interpretations, the opening statement is misleading.

2) “She sees her self as a victim and maybe she's right. A victim of the benefit system, the benefits culture that we have created over the decades. How else can you explain so many people in this neighbourhood out of work?” - John Humphreys

2.1a) If the third sentence is a rhetorical question, then this statement is misleading because it implies that there is no explanation other than 'the benefits culture' causing unemployment.

2.1b) If the third sentence is a prelude to finding an explanation, then the documentary is biased because Humphreys never interviews an economist or historian that could provide a rational alternative explanation.

2.2) An economist could have explained an alternative explanation that unemployment is high today because of increasing job losses due to economic stagnation or contraction and that the nearest we have had to full employment (late 40s/1950s) was due to massive public infrastructure spending to create jobs.

In the documentary, Humphreys implies a healthy jobs market due to the number of jobs advertised. This is a common error. Net jobs created (jobs created is more than jobs lost) reduce unemployment. Without net jobs created, jobs advertised relates most significantly to staff turnover. I believe a good economist could explain that today's jobs market is unhealthy and this leads to growing unemployment.

2.3) A historian could explain that unemployment in Cardiff (and the UK) was higher throughout the 1930s than it is today. Therefore, unemployment was higher before the welfare state. A historian could show that unemployment rates can be far higher even when the unemployed starve to death. These facts, radically diminish the perception of a 'benefits culture'.

3) Bias on Incapacity/Disability Benefit Claimants.

John Humphreys talks to two people both making statements suggesting many Incapacity Claimants do not have a long-term sickness or disability.

3.1) Dr Sharon Fisher, Wellbeing Centre

3.2) Professor Steve Fothergill, Sheffield Hallam University

He talks to one incapacity benefit recipient Evonne Power, who talks about her own experience.

This is biased because Evonne Power's personal experience can not sufficiently counter-balance the 'authoritative' overview of Professor Steve Fothergill or that of a doctor.

At no time does Humphreys give any indication of the breadth and scale of concern by politicians, organisations and charities at the problems with the WCA medical assessment or the cuts to disability benefits.

Humphreys states: "Political dynamite. You can imagine the headlines if it goes wrong."

This further gives the impression that to date, there has been no wide-scale concern at the disability benefit policy.

In fact John Humphreys could have talked to these people or organisations concerned by the WCA and the cuts:

3.3) Disability Benefits Consortium, representing 41 charities

3.4) Members of the Work and Pensions Select Committee

3.5) Professor Paul Gregg, Bristol University

3.6) The General Medical Council

Actually, Humphreys talks to Paul Gregg (architect of the ESA and critic of the Atos WCA assessments) elsewhere in the documentary. So it would not have cost the production any more.