

Let them bake cake: UK Conservative MP blames foodbank use on workers' lack of budgeting and catering skills

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13 May 2022

On Tuesday Lee Anderson, Conservative MP for Ashfield, rose to his feet in Parliament to deliver a rant against those facing growing food insecurity as a result of the rising cost-of-living crisis. A Labour councillor until 2018, he claimed there was not “this massive use of food banks in this country” and blamed “generation after generation” who “cannot cook properly” and “cannot budget”.

The degraded spectacle of a Tory MP denying the undeniable came in the debate in the House of Commons following a Queen’s Speech which failed to outline a single measure to alleviate the largest fall in living standards in 70 years. Whether to “eat or heat” is now a dilemma facing millions of the elderly, unemployed and welfare benefit recipients, as well as a growing legion of those in work whose wages continue to plummet against rising inflation.

Anderson’s contemptable remarks came just after a report by the Food Foundation whose survey found that more than 2 million adults in the UK had gone without food for a day in the last month. There was a 57 percent increase in households cutting back on food over the first three months of the year, with 7.3 million adults thought to be food insecure.

The Trussell Trust—the UK’s largest foodbank charity with a network of 1,300 around the country—has noted that 14 million people are already living in poverty the UK, of which 4.5 million are children. Even prior to the cost-of-living crisis, a decade of austerity had already created a situation by 2019 in which there were more foodbanks than branches of McDonalds in Britain—2,000 versus 1,300.

Head of Policy Sumi Rabindrakumar told *The Independent*, “Research from the Trussell Trust and other independent organisations is clear—that food bank need in

the UK is about lack of income, not food.”

Anderson’s allegation that bad personal budgeting and catering skills account for food insecurity, not social inequality, is exposed by his claimed solution. He boasted that a foodbank in his Nottinghamshire constituency had shown people how to produce a meal for 30 pence. The comment, in the style of a 19th century Poor Law Guardian, makes clear the grinding level of subsistence the Tories are prepared to reduce the working class to while demanding it suffers in silence.

Far from a lone voice, Anderson’s utter disregard for widespread social suffering joined a chorus ongoing for weeks now, from the prime minister on down. Last Tuesday, Boris Johnson gave an interview to *Good Morning Britain* where he was put on the spot by the example of a 77-year-old woman who had cut her meals back to one a day and travelled around on the bus all day to keep warm. Johnson responded by implying she owed him a debt of gratitude for introducing the all-day bus pass when he was London Mayor.

On Wednesday, Michael Gove, the Cabinet Minister and Secretary of State for Levelling Up gave a totally bizarre interview to the BBC in which he badly imitated a series of accents while mocking criticism of the government for not announcing an emergency budget to tackle the cost-of-living crisis. He stated that the Treasury was telling everyone correctly to “Calm down.”

There have been other right-wing screeds. Conservative MP for South Ribble Katherine Fletcher claimed that the unemployed were “sitting on benefits”. She launched into an attack on the Resolution Foundation think tank which had assessed that an extra 1.3 million people, including 500,000 children, would be left in poverty this year as a result of the government’s refusal to reinstate the £20 weekly uplift in Universal Credit welfare payments put in

place during the pandemic.

The British ruling class presides over a society which has become even more divided along class lines during the pandemic. The UK's billionaires saw their wealth increase by 21.7 percent, an overall rise of £106.5 billion, according to the *Sunday Times* Rich List 2021.

According to the Office for National Statistics, in 2018-20 the wealthiest 10 percent of British households, comprising the upper middle classes and super-rich, owned 43 percent of total wealth. The bottom half of the British population held a meagre 9 percent. The wealth of the richest top 1 percent of households was on average more than £3.6 million a staggering 230 times higher than the £15,400 or less for the poorest 10 percent.

This is not the result of policy failures but of conscious policy decisions which encouraged a massive transfer of wealth to the rich through government bailouts of the corporations and quantitative easing to the tune of billions of pounds, designed to protect private wealth while public health was sacrificed. The working class is continuing to bear the brunt of the virus and is now being made to foot the ruling class's bill through a ramping up of exploitation.

Even the limited measure of a one-off windfall tax on the energy companies has been ruled out as workers face staggering debts. In April, every household in the UK was hit by a massive 54 percent rise in energy bills, to be followed by a similar hike in October. With inflation climbing to 10 percent, UK households face a devastating £2,620 increase in bills and other costs. Meanwhile, UK oil giants Shell and BP announced record quarterly profits for this year of \$9.1 billion and \$6.2 billion respectively.

The fact that the Johnson government feels no compulsion to make any concessions to alleviate the growth of inequality and absolute poverty—even from the standpoint of self-preservation—is the greatest indictment of the Labour Party and the trade unions. The anti-social ravings of the Tories received an entirely ineffectual and muted response from these organisations. It is not a simply a case of the government being “out of touch”, as claimed by the Trades Union Congress and Labour Party; the British ruling class is criminally out of control—and Labour and the TUC have left the working class defenceless in the face of this rampage.

To the extent Labour has presented any mealy-mouthed objections to the Conservatives over the past two years, this has been premised on providing only “constructive” criticism in the name of national unity and on the fraud of appealing to the moral conscience of Tory MPs.

The Partygate crisis should have been the writing on the wall for the Johnson government but that would have meant opposing the entire policy of social murder from which the contempt for lockdown measures flowed. Instead, with almost 200,000 left dead by the policy of mass infection, trampling underfoot scientific and medical advice, Labour parrots the mantra of “living with COVID” with all public health measures abandoned. This under conditions in which the rising death toll is completely ignored, let alone the danger of new variants.

While there is no money for the relief of social hardship or a depleted and overwhelmed National Health Service, military spending is on tap. Only this week the government announced a further dispatch of military aid to Ukraine bringing total funding to £3 billion, second only to the US. The Labour Party continually seeks to outflank the Tories in its demands for escalating the NATO proxy war against Russia and for further hikes in military spending.

As the Socialist Equality Party explained in its statement “The working class must mobilise to bring down the Johnson government”, the Tories and Labour confront the working class as a single hostile entity, a joint party of herd immunity, austerity, social reaction and war. It concluded:

“Above all, bringing the pandemic under control, defending workers’ livelihoods and opposing militarism and war requires the unification of the working class in every country against the common enemy, unleashing the most powerful social force in the world in the struggle for socialism. There are no shortcuts. The working class is entering into decisive battles and requires a new leadership, the Socialist Equality Party”.



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