

# The demonisation of the disabled is a chilling sign of the times

Monday 9 July 2012, by [BIRRELL Ian](#) (Date first published: 4 December 2011).

**There is a climate of hostility towards people for whom life is already difficult and it is being fostered by politicians and journalists.**

Peter Greener endured a barrage of hate from his neighbour. Sometimes, it was eggs thrown at his house, stones thrown at his windows or paint thrown at his fence; more often, it was words hurled in his face: spastic, cripple, scum, scrounger. These assaults went on for months, leaving the former Nissan car-sprayer in floods of tears, feeling suicidal and on antidepressants. He was scared to leave his home in Hebburn in South Tyneside and blamed himself for the upset it caused his wife and two children. "It made our lives hell," he said.

Like many people with conditions such as multiple sclerosis, Greener's regressive condition fluctuates. One day, it affects his memory, the next his speech. Sometimes, he uses a wheelchair; at other times, he can haul himself around on crutches. But this only led to more abuse, with angry shouts he was faking his disabilities and exaggerating his problems to get benefits.

A terrible story to shake our heads over and ponder how a person could be so vile, so inhuman, towards someone already suffering a tough time. But the real tragedy of the tale is that it is all too commonplace in this country. The only unusual thing is that the inadequate perpetrator was caught and given a comparatively strong sentence last month.

Yesterday was international day of persons with disabilities, but in this country they remain locked in a state of virtual apartheid. They are forced to the fringes of society, ostracised from things the rest of us take for granted such as getting a job or going on public transport. Such is the estrangement that a survey last week found two-thirds of Britons actively avoid disabled people because they have no idea how to act around them [\[1\]](#).

The idea of treating them like anyone else is obviously too much for most Britons. But the Greener case highlights something a new and troubling trend in this supposedly tolerant nation. Note the use of the word "scrounger", the spiteful claim that he was faking his disabilities. This kind of abuse is being increasingly heard. With economic storm clouds darkening, disabled people have become easy scapegoats in the age of austerity.

Polls have found substantial increases in the number of disabled people experiencing aggression and abuse, with evidence that the attitudes of the rest of society towards them are worsening. Many disabled people were already scared to go out after dark or travel on public transport such is their justified fear of encountering hostility.

Little wonder many people with disabilities are downbeat. Alice Maynard, chair of the charity Scope and a lifelong wheelchair user, told me she was terrified by the surly mood. "I'm quite an optimistic person by nature, but are we facing a truly ghastly scenario, in which we will live surrounded by

hate and with a very limited social care system?"

It is not just the vicious attacks capturing headlines that dislocate lives. Take David Gillon, a software engineer who helped build Eurofighter jets before losing his job three years ago. He walks with crutches and has been physically attacked and regularly shouted at in the street since he slipped and injured his back two decades ago.

Earlier this year, someone reported him to the government's benefit fraud hotline. Officials dismissed the allegation as soon as they walked in his front door, but his condition, which is stress-related, worsened for several months. Now he feels so threatened he barely leaves his house. "If I go out, I know I could suffer more abuse," he said. One cruel act – and another person left a virtual prisoner in their own home.

As the parent of a defenceless daughter with profound disabilities, such stories disturb me. They should disturb us all. So what lies behind this harsh new mood towards the disabled?

Unfortunately, much blame rests on the shoulders of the media and certain parts of government. There has been a new dialogue over disability, characterised by the constant drip-drip of stories implying vast numbers of disability claimants are bogus, that benefits are doled out without proper checks and taxpayers fund free cars for thousands of children with minor behavioural disorders.

Many emanate from the Department for Work and Pensions, which has twisted facts, manipulated statistics and distorted data to win support for its drive to cut costs and crack down on benefit fraud. This cascade of spurious claims and scandalously spun stories ends up demonising the disabled. It does no credit to Iain Duncan Smith, the secretary of state, who proclaims himself a compassionate Conservative. Ministers say they cannot be blamed for the actions of the media, but they know how the game is played.

Meanwhile, there has been a significant increase in articles about "cheats", "scroungers" and "skivers" in the media. Not just tabloids, but broadsheets and broadcasters. A recent Glasgow Media Group study revealed a near-tripling of these words in papers, alongside a reduction in reports on discrimination and sympathetic stories about disabled people. Focus groups found people suggesting seven in 10 claimants were fraudulent; in reality, levels of fraud for disability benefits are 0.5%, much lower than for other benefits – and less than the level of errors made by officials.

Among those feeling the coldest chill of this new mood of intolerance are people with mental health conditions, already so often victims of bullying and hate crimes. They may not look obviously disabled, so are targeted as "scroungers". The charities Mencap and Mind have received numerous calls from people distressed by the witch hunt; one person said they felt like an "object of hate and derision with no escape".

No one, least of all those with disabilities, disputes the need to prevent fraud. Every pound stolen by a fake claimant is a pound not spent on vital services or much-needed support. Nor is this an argument about the need or otherwise for cuts. My view is that there remains huge inefficiency in public services, although many poor services are being ring-fenced and cuts imposed in the wrong places. But as people scrap for resources and stresses intensify, resentment is growing against the disabled, undermining any good things the government is doing in this area.

It is grossly irresponsible for journalists and politicians to collude in this manner to create a climate encouraging hatred, hostility and abuse towards people for whom life is already so difficult. This would be true at any time, but especially at a time of such uncertainty, when people are fearful of the future and looking for others to blame for their misfortune. Those with disabilities should not be

made scapegoats for other people's sins.

**Ian Birrell**

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**P.S.**

\* The Observer, Sunday 4 December 2011

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/dec/04/ian-birrell-prejudice-against-disabled>

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### **Footnotes**

[1] <http://www.4-traders.com/BT-GROUP-PLC-4003616/news/BT-Group-plc-Two-Thirds-avoid-disabled-people-13916624/>