

## CIVIL SERVICE CUTS



What will you make of the strike and rally by thousands of civil servants in Nottingham today? When the miners strike filled the Market Square with protestors in the 1980's, everyone knew it was about the future and survival of the pits. When disabled people brought traffic to a halt by chaining themselves to buses in the City Centre, we knew it was about disability rights. But civil servants don't strike. So what is going on?

Today's action, taken by many who have never been on strike in their life, all stems from a mystifying idea by the Chancellor that he could make public services more efficient by sacking large numbers of staff. Over 100,000 jobs are being targeted for this 'efficiency purge'. It plays to a popular prejudice that public services are just bureaucracies that get in the way. Scratch the surface of this, however, and you

quickly discover how much Nottingham will lose rather than gain.

In recent years there has been a huge increase in means-tested benefits. This, rather than the staff, has created a complex and confusing bureaucracy. We know there are 5 million pensioners currently eligible for government Pension Credits. Of these, 2 million simply do not claim. The bureaucracy of claiming just overwhelms them. But if you sack the staff who give advice on getting through the Benefits maze, you just increase the numbers who fail to take up benefits. It is a way of saving money, but not of improving public services.

In Nottingham it will involve closing Benefit Offices on David Lane (Basford), Castlegate, Water Court and Castle Boulevard (in the City Centre) and in Hucknall and Netherfield. Two benefit offices would remain in the City centre, but Community based services would be replaced by call centres. No one has asked local communities whether they see this as a gain or a loss.

In fact, no one has asked civil servants or local communities whether they would find far greater 'productivity' gains from scrapping means-testing altogether and restoring the value of the state pension and universal benefits. Nor has anyone been able to get the Chancellor to look at productivity gains from scrapping the 220 different payment systems in the civil service. The compelling case is for dumping 219 of these and having a single pay structure for all staff.

In some of the work done by civil servants in Nottingham, the only efficiency gains to be found are from employing more staff rather than less. We have a backlog of people waiting to take their driving tests. There aren't enough examiners to keep pace with demand. More examiners are the only way of reducing waiting times.

The Nottingham SureStart scheme has been one of the government's great successes in 'early years' work with children and their families. But does it make any sense to try to expand children's services by cutting 33% of the staff who support this work?

Nottingham has made huge demands recently that, in the struggle against drug and gun crime in the City, we do something to halt the supply of guns and drugs onto the city streets. Why then seek to cut 15,000 staff from Customs and Excise in the merger with the Inland Revenue? If the answer is that the jobs will go from the Revenue rather than Customs and Excise, where does that leave us in chasing big company tax fraud, that other tax payers have to cover.

My reason for supporting civil servants in this dispute is simple. These are decent people on relatively poor pay. They believe in the ethic of public service. Not one of them will have closed a put, started a war or privatised a railway. But demoralise the civil service and we undermine civil society.

I can think of a hundred ways of making public services more efficient and accountable. Not one of them begins with the arbitrary jobs cull we are now threatened with. Margaret Thatcher used demoralisation as the first step to privatisation. The public would pay a heavy price for going down the same path a second time.

alansimpsonmp.co.uk 