

# It's one law for them...

There's never been a good time to be poor in Britain but, in 2016, if you're poor and also have a legal problem, then it's horrendous. Since the former Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government introduced the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders (LASPO) Act, which came into force in April 2013, groups which can no longer obtain legal aid to help them pursue their cases include:

- low paid parents fighting to have contact with their estranged children;
- vulnerable workers unfairly dismissed;
- disabled people whose benefits have been inexplicably withdrawn.

This is because LASPO completely removed legal aid for legal matters concerning benefits, employment and family cases and also severely restricted people's ability to obtain legal aid to fund legal assistance for housing, discrimination and immigration matters.

The effect of the LASPO Act over the last three years has been dramatic and devastating. The Law Centres Network, the national body that represents UK Law Centres, reports that in the year before LASPO came into force, 82,542 people were assisted in claiming the welfare benefits to which they were entitled. However, just a year later, only 258 people were helped!

Even areas where some legal aid is still available have seen a dramatic decline in the number of people helped. Last year, for example, the number of legally aided community care cases dropped by 65% and housing cases by 50%. Debt cases fell by 49% in a year and only 1% (really!) of people who applied for help with debt matters received legal aid compared to the period before LASPO was introduced.

On top of the problems of people on low incomes being unable to pursue their cases, the number of Law Centres and other not-for-profit legal providers in the UK has decreased substantially, with 509 of them -- a 13.5% drop -- having closed in the last year. Overall, there are now 902 fewer offices than before

**Barrister Miranda Grell works for Hackney Law Centre – and sees first hand how individuals are excluded from basic rights when lack of funding squeezes access to the law.**

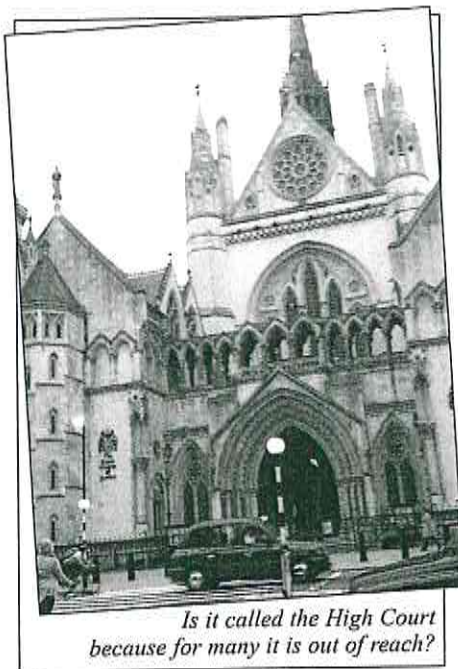
the LASPO Act was introduced.

These closures, particularly of Law Centres, are a tragedy because Law Centres operate at the heart of their local communities, in order to provide legal advice and representation to poor and vulnerable clients that mainstream law firms would never represent. The Law Society recently reported that following LASPO, there are no longer any law firms providing legally aided housing advice in Surrey, Shropshire or Suffolk. Whole swathes of the United Kingdom are now advice deserts.

At the time of writing, both contenders for the party leadership have expressed their commitment to abolishing employment tribunal fees. These fees are considered to be the direct cause of the 80% drop in employment tribunal claims lodged. Jeremy Corbyn and Owen Smith's commitment is welcome, but it isn't just a matter of abolishing tribunal fees or even just reversing the LASPO cuts. There is also a pressing need for Labour to come up with ideas that will help ordinary people learn more about their legal rights and empower them to stand up to rogue landlords, bullying employers or the punitive Department for Work and Pensions.

The National Education Service proposed by Jeremy Corbyn needs to ensure that public legal education is given a high priority. Also, with a growing number of people now accessing information through wifi with their smart phones, Labour should build on Jeremy Corbyn's recently launched digital democracy manifesto and work with tech enthusiasts and Law Centres to ensure that the manifesto's proposed "Open Knowledge Library" contains a dedicated public legal education section. If apps could be created so that the Library's contents could be downloaded, that would be even better.

When the Legal Aid Act was introduced in 1949, legal aid was considered the fourth pillar of the welfare state. The Attlee Government rightly concluded that because the law regulates everyone's lives, everyone should have the right to access the law, whatever their financial circumstances. Labour is currently fighting spirited public battles to defend the NHS, social housing and comprehensive education. The poor, sick and marginalised need Labour to fight just as hard for Legal Aid too.



What should the Labour Party do?

Those working at the sharp end of legal aid have been encouraged by the current Labour Party leadership's commitment to tackling this appalling state of affairs. In November 2015, Labour launched a new Access to Justice Commission to consider ways that the state can guarantee that those who need access to legal advice or representation have access to it.