

BETRAYED

DAMIAN THOMPSON: Betrayed - our wealthy leaders won't have to sell their houses for the privilege of staring at the TV in a grotty care home. But they've just ratted on everyone who will

By [DAMIAN THOMPSON FOR THE DAILY MAIL](#)

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When the Conservatives were chasing the votes of Britain's middle-class pensioners in the General Election campaign, they knew which button to press. 'We will cap the amount you can be charged for your residential care, so you can have the dignity and security you deserve in your old age,' said the Conservative manifesto. 'We will cap charges for residential social care from April 2016 and also allow deferred payment agreements, so no one has to sell their home.'



The Conservatives promised 'no one' would have to go through the experience of putting their house on the market in order to pay for care in their old age. 'For the first time, individual liabilities will be limited, giving everyone the peace of mind that they will receive the care they need and that they will be protected from unlimited costs if they develop very serious care needs, such as dementia.'

Note the choice of words; soothing and flattering at the same time, plus the clear timetable. Coming up next April: 'peace of mind' and 'the dignity and security you deserve'. Soon, we were reassured, 'no one' would have to go through the humiliating, confusing and painful experience of putting their house on the market in order to pay for care. That promise was made on April 15, 2015. On Friday, it was broken. Instead of capping charges at £72,000 next year, the Government has kicked its pledge into the long grass to 2020 — at the earliest.

Pledges

We are used to politicians breaking their manifesto pledges, but I wonder if Alistair Burt, the care minister, has set a new record by publicly ditching a flagship policy after just three months. This is

how he did it: 'A time of consolidation is not the right moment to be implementing expensive new commitments such as this.' Call me a cynic but that sounds to me awfully like: 'The aftermath of an election victory, with the Opposition in chaos, is just the right moment to betray old people who have served their purpose by voting for us.'

Mr Burt is right when he says that a £72,000 cap on care costs, with the State stepping in to pay the rest, is expensive. Under the current means-testing, anyone with assets of more than £23,250 has to pay the full cost of their care. Ministers reckon that the four-year delay will save £6 billion but they could have done that calculation before they wrote the manifesto. Perhaps they did. Many pensioners and their family members, who had no idea this shameless volte-face was in the works, will have spent a miserable weekend going over their accounts and wondering how the hell they are going to find money they were promised they would never have to spend.



Has care minister Alistair Burt set a new record by publicly ditching a flagship policy after just three months?

Some of them will have put in calls to estate agents: 'That little semi-detached next to the vicarage that I told you I didn't need to sell because the Tories won the election? Well, you had better send your man round.'

If I sound angry about this, let me explain. My mother has just put her house on the market because she has moved into a residential care home. She needs full-time care (hardly surprising, given that she's nearly 92) but, fortunately, she can afford it. We are not a rich family, but my father's early death 30 years ago left her with a nice pension from his employer, the Prudential.

Also, my mother was (still is) one of nature's savers. 'Watch your outgoings, dear,' she told me last week as she was having her hair permed in the nursing home. 'I'm trying to,' I said. 'For example, I haven't brought you any flowers.' (She laughed, but next time it had better be a big bouquet.)

The Government's cap would not have stopped us selling the house — it was the obvious thing to do — but it would have brought down the bills and I reckon my mother, who joined the Army during World War II

and came close to being killed as V2 rockets rained down on her headquarters on the South Coast, is entitled to the money. Not just because she did her bit for Britain when it needed her help, but because she was promised it by the party for whom she voted; just as she did in 1945, 1950, 1951, 1955, 1959, 1964, 1966, 1970, 1974 (twice), 1979, 1983, 1987, 1992, 1997, 2001, 2005 and 2010.

Other pensioners are in a far worse position than my mother.

Injuries

It was thanks to my sister that we found Buckingham House, a lovely new nursing home in Gerrards Cross, Buckinghamshire, where my mother's room opens onto a patio and the living room has proper fireplaces and bookshelves. When my mother arrived, she was greeted with a huge hug by Diana Rouse, the manager, an ebullient Irish lady who picks every member of staff. 'I don't want anyone working here whom I wouldn't trust to look after my mother,' she says. Not everyone can afford Buckingham House, however, and that is where the nightmare starts. The demographic timebomb is a gift to care-home cowboys. In 2013, inspectors for the Care Quality Commission issued 910 'warning notices' to care homes. In the worst of these, old people

were left in dirty beds and their requests to use the lavatory were ignored. Staff falsified medical records and unexplained injuries were unreported.

I have not visited a home this bad, but I do know what mediocre care looks like. Ladies who reassure you with their beaming smiles and then are too busy chattering on the phone to family in Newcastle or Lagos to listen for the alarm bell; a 'highly qualified' nurse from Romania who, it turned out, could not recognise the symptoms of dehydration.

The sorry truth is that you probably have to spend £72,000 to avoid ending your days in quiet misery; quiet, that is, apart from the shouts of dementia patients who are treated like naughty pets by short-tempered staff. No wonder many old people find themselves waving goodbye to their homes, and any hope of leaving money to their children: they will spend anything to keep out of the grips of cost-cutting care-home owners for whom extreme old age is just another commodity.



None of our current Cabinet will have to sell their house to pay for the privilege of staring at the telly in a grotty care home with nothing to look forward to except a custard cream with their lukewarm tea. By postponing the cap, the Government is compounding a problem that it and its predecessors helped to create, by failing to scrutinise residential care in the same way as hospitals. As baby-boomers move from tanned early retirement to the kind of old age where you need help going to the loo, there is no way the taxpayer can escape mountainous bills. Any solution will be complicated, but no formula will work unless government spending in other areas is reduced.

We have to start somewhere, so here's an idea: scrap our voluntary payments to the European Development Fund which, as the Taxpayers' Alliance campaign group revealed yesterday, funds such life-changing projects as trapeze lessons and teaching Tanzanians how to turn plastic bags into art. There: £400 million a year saved at the stroke of a pen.

I can't see it happening, though. We have a Cabinet of rich men and women who would much rather discuss exotic philanthropy at their kitchen suppers than the anxieties of suburban octogenarians.

Snooty

None of them will have to sell their house to pay for the privilege of staring at the telly in a grotty care home with nothing to look forward to except a custard cream with their lukewarm tea.

I still cannot believe the nonchalance with which care minister Alistair Burt brushed away his 'expensive new commitment'. Indeed, he has the same moral authority of a mate of mine who, if asked for money he owes you, pats his pockets in mock panic and says: 'Sorry, wrong trousers.'

When David Cameron won his surprise majority, he told us we would get a proper Tory Government. And so, I fear, we have: one that, in the tradition of the snooty administrations before Thatcher, breaks its pact with the despised 'lawn-mowing classes' as soon as the votes are counted.

I never thought I would say this, but it almost makes me yearn for the good old days of the Coalition.