Sarah Wollaston (Totnes Conservative)

Has the hon. Lady met people trapped on benefits, many of whom, incidentally, are women? The failure to address the perverse incentives operating in our benefits system was utterly spineless and ignored the real misery affecting those who live trapped in our benefits system.

Angela Eagle (Wallasey, Labour)

The hon. Lady's intervention was extremely helpful. Of course I have. We have all done a great deal of work on social security reform, and I hope she will be the first to acknowledge some of the progress we made, particularly in helping lone parents into work. Tax credits and all the support we gave on child care were among the measures that were crucial in ensuring that we managed to increase significantly the number of lone parents in work when we were in office. I hope she will be the first to recognise our success in those areas. She should take a close look at the increasing rates of marginal tax that came about because of some of the changes, particularly for lone parents, and the savings made in tax credits, and she should also have a word with her party's Front-Bench team about their priorities for cuts, given that they are taking away benefits that particularly help women go out to work.

In softening up the country for this age of austerity, Ministers have been anxious to establish some myths, the first of which is that the deficit was a Labour spending choice. We heard a lot of that today from the Chief Secretary to the Treasury. The second myth is that the cuts announced are unavoidable. We need to start with some facts. When the credit crunch struck in 2008, Britain had the second-lowest debt in the G7. We had low interest rates, low inflation and low unemployment. There is nothing reckless about that. Now, however, the Conservative party and the Liberal Democrats are trying to rewrite history.

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