The Health and Safety Executive has been hobbled by an unprecedented and savage funding cut. Safety rules are being relaxed. And the government says it’s all happening in the name of common sense. Don’t you believe it, says Hazards editor Rory O’Neill – it’s a political project driven by the business lobby and built around dangerous lies.

Business doesn’t pick up the tab for the injuries and diseases caused by work. An HSE report concluded less than a quarter of the cost to society of occupational ill-health and injury was borne by employers, although they were by and large responsible for the workplace conditions that led to the injury or ill-health (Hazards 106). The research found “society” bore most of the cost burden, followed by “individuals.” And when the business lobby rolls out its annual whinge about the costs of health and safety regulation, it omits systematically the far greater financial and other benefits of those laws (Hazards 111).

The business lobby’s top bugbear is risk assessments, which it complains are petty bureaucracy and a burden. But if you are too dumb to easily and quickly complete a risk assessment on your own business activities, you are too dumb to run that business.

Business says we need a can-do, not a can-sue culture. It’s got it. Fewer than one in 10 victims of work-related injuries or ill-health get any sort of compensation. Government figures show there are now about a third the number of claims for work-related injuries and diseases as there were a decade ago (Hazards 111).

And it is not as though they just give compensation away. Claimants have to demonstrate they are suffering and their problems are the result of their employer’s negligence. If businesses want to avoid compensation claims, all they have to do is avoid hurting their staff.

And old diseases are affecting new groups faced recently, including Asbestosis syndrome, reactive dye asthma and flock workers’ lung in the garment sector and popcorn workers’ lung in food manufacture (Hazards 101).

Several new occupational diseases have surfaced recently, including Aystisii syndrome, reactive dye asthma and flock workers’ lung in the garment sector and popcorn workers’ lung in food manufacture (Hazards 101).

And old diseases are affecting new groups of workers – like silicosis in the workers giving your jeans that fashionable worn look (page 12).

Small firms are overrepresented in the most hazardous sectors – construction, agriculture and transport. They are often the ones that benefit most from the support of a properly resourced health and safety enforcement agency.

One of the sectors with the highest rates of reportable injuries is ‘public administration’ – that’s office work. And violence is a major problem in frontline service industry jobs – including health and social services and retail.

Studies in the UK have established two methods are far-and-away the most effective at delivering safer, healthier workplaces – a credible inspection and enforcement regime and worker participation with active trade union involvement (Hazards 10).

Voluntary schemes have been tried and have failed spectacularly. The model comes from the US, where an investigation is underway into abuses of their ineffective Voluntary Protection Programme (VPP) and inflated claims of its usefulness. The official focus is instead shifting to inspection and enforcement.

In Ireland, the introduction of a copycat VPP scheme was followed by a dramatic increase in workplace deaths. After it switched back to a system based on inspections, workplace deaths fell to a record low.

There are two other problems with leaving firms to police themselves. Without preventive inspections, HSE will be unable to uncover rogue employers, particularly those exposing their workers to slow-burn health risks like occupational cancers.

And if HSE isn’t policing the rogues, the prospect of justice after their criminal breaches of health and safety law disappears entirely.

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That’s crazy. The number of health and safety regulations has almost halved since 1974.

Over the last four years the number of forms used by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) to collect information from business has dropped from 127 to 54.

And firms are hardly being harangued by meddling inspectors. A decade ago, HSE could be expected to turn up at the average workplace once every few years. Now workplaces are lucky to see an inspector once in a working lifetime (Hazards 110) and fewer than 1 in 15 major injuries now results in an appearance from HSE (Hazards 108). HSE prosecutions and convictions have halved since 2001. Tens of thousands die each year because of a criminal disregard for health and safety at work. Just a few hundred end up in court.

And brutal cuts to HSE’s budget and a new hands-off government policy is a dramatic reduction in official oversight of dangerous employers (page 4). That’s mad.

Boardrooms don’t care about demonstrating health and safety common sense, they care about demonstrating their profitability (Hazards 110).

They have an absolute legal duty to defend the interests of shareholders, but only a heavily qualified “reasonably practicable” legal duty to protect the health and safety of the people they employ. In this dangerously topsy-turvy system, it’s no wonder safety takes a backseat.

That’s why the voluntary directors’ duties scheme was a total flop (Hazards 111); ditto the CHaSPI Corporate Health and Safety Performance Index and other voluntary schemes (page 5).

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Resources

For references, background documents and campaign materials, see the Hazards website:

www.hazards.org/votetodie

www.hazards.org/deadlybusiness

www.hazards.org/workinghealth

www.hazards.org/votetodie