

The repugance of Robert Jenrick

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In [my post on Robert Jenrick's proposals](#), made on behalf of Reform, to change UK policy on health and disability benefits, I mentioned my concern about his choice of language in his [Telegraph article](#), in which he outlines these ideas.

In it he describes the existing approach to social security as “suicidal empathy”. That phrase would be objectionable at any time when discussing people experiencing anxiety, depression and other forms of mental distress. At this particular moment, [following the death of Jason Arday](#), its insensitivity is particularly striking.

Arday had achieved precisely the sort of participation in working life that Jenrick claims to want. Despite being autistic and dyslexic and having faced significant barriers throughout his life, he became a professor at Cambridge. He did not withdraw from society or employment. He participated in both and achieved success.

He then became the subject of intense and hostile scrutiny, including from the right-wing press, concerning whether he should have occupied the position to which he had been appointed.

Following his death, serious allegations have been made about the impact this sustained campaign had on him. It would be wrong to speculate about matters that have not been established, but that is precisely why anyone discussing mental distress and suicide should choose their language with exceptional care.

Another disturbing contradiction here should not be overlooked. The political right tells people experiencing mental ill health that employment is essential to their wellbeing and that they must participate in working life. Yet when a Black, autistic and dyslexic man overcame immense barriers and secured one of the most prestigious academic positions in Britain, parts of the same political and media culture devoted considerable effort to questioning whether he should have had that job. That fact should make anyone hesitate before suggesting that employment is simply waiting for those prepared to make sufficient effort.

Prejudice is very real on this issue, not least from Robert Jenrick and those who support

his party. The repugnance of the language Jenrick is using should be noted: he condemns himself by his choices.