Funding the Future

Why Alan Milburn is so wrong about people with autism a...

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In Alan Milburn's report on young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs), published yesterday, he reveals profound confusion about people with autism and ADHD, and makes serious misrepresentations as a result.

When we know that one of the major reasons why the number of NEETs is increasing is that more people are being recognised as having autism and ADHD, or both, it is deeply upsetting, profoundly unprofessional, and indicative of a mindset that is seriously discriminatory that Alan Milburn has failed to understand so much about these conditions.

I will ignore the fact that he has seriously misrepresented the findings in Professor Fonagy's recent report on this issue, which did not, as Milburn suggests, imply that there might be overdiagnosis of these conditions in the UK at present. It did, in fact, suggest that this conclusion could not be drawn, whilst making clear that the current enhanced rate of diagnosis is simply because so many have been undiagnosed in the past, which is a fact Milburn has completely chosen to ignore, or simply did not understand.

Instead, my anger at what he has to say is about his representation of the purpose of diagnosis, and his assumption that ADHD and autism are conditions that need to be treated, when for a great many people they are nothing of the sort.

Autism and ADHD are lifelong conditions for those who have them. They are not curable; few people with them would want to be free of them, and in many cases no treatment is required. The purpose of a diagnosis is, in fact, usually to help the person with these conditions understand the difficulties that they face living in a neurotypical world which is not adapted to their needs and where most people - very clearly Alan Milburn included - do not understand what those needs might be, and have no desire to appraise themselves of them.

Those securing a diagnosis almost always seek understanding of their situation, but are very rarely seeking anything like a cure, and I suspect the majority never want

treatment. That Alan Milburn, despite this, thinks diagnosis without treatment represents a failure of the process is therefore completely wrong, just as he is completely wrong to think that because most assessments result in a diagnosis, the assessments must be biased or wrong.

He appears to be entirely unaware that there is a selection bias in all samples of people appraised for almost any condition. For example, as a matter of fact, most people seeking a diagnosis for a broken leg suspect they have a broken leg. The same is true of most of those who seek diagnosis for autism and ADHD. They think they have these conditions. That the rate of diagnosis amongst those seeking it in both cases is then, inevitably, much higher than for the population as a whole is totally unsurprising. It is staggering that Milburn does not understand this.

The greatest offence of all, though, is that Milburn is defining the success criteria of the programmes that he is putting in place as the rate of preparation of people for employment, without ever considering whether the employment in question is suited to the needs of the people who he wishes to take the jobs in question.

If he is demanding that people with autism, ADHD and other disabilities take jobs without their particular needs being met in the workplace, he is not offering opportunity. He is, instead, deliberately and systematically denying benefits to people with real needs while requiring them to enter workplaces that are unsuited to them, and where they may face prejudice. Worse, they will then be blamed for the difficulties they encounter, as if their disabilities were their own fault, because it will be said they have not sought cures that do not exist, when what is actually required is adaptation within the workplace to meet their needs, and none of that seems to be on the table.

Milburn’s approach does then reflect a familiar assumption within neoliberal economic thinking, which is that there is a standard model of the human being against which everyone should be assessed. Although he acknowledges human diversity, he assumes that participation in conventional education, training and paid employment is the appropriate measure of a person’s contribution to society. Those who do not conform are consequently treated as presenting a problem requiring correction. Although he recognises that the state and markets have failed many of these people, and proposes additional support, he does not question whether the economic expectations imposed upon them are appropriate. Instead, he proposes that those who fail to meet those expectations may suffer financial penalties, including the loss of benefits.

The fundamental problem is that Milburn appears to accept human diversity only insofar as it can be accommodated within an economic system whose objectives he takes for granted. He does not sufficiently consider whether that system should instead be redesigned to accommodate the full diversity of human experience, capability and need. That is the difference between a state that expects people to adapt to the economy and one that accepts responsibility for ensuring that the economy meets the needs of people.

That failure is what discrimination looks like.

This is what prejudice means in practice.

This is the practical evidence of state-enforced performative cruelty.

This discrimination, to be blunt, is as bad as racism, sexism, homophobia and all the other unacceptable forms of discrimination that exist within our society, but Milburn is putting it up on a pedestal to be ignored by denying its very existence.

You might sense that I am very angry. I am, and I think rightly so.