

July 30, 2012

Dear Mr. Milliband,

I am a UK-based journalist and broadcaster. Here is a link to my website. www.soniapoulton.co.uk. On my site you will find all the media outlets that I contribute to across print, TV, radio and internet, nationally and internationally.

I am prompted to write to you having just watched these two programmes on the subject of 'fit to work' testing for sick and disabled people: Channel 4's Dispatches ('Britain On The Sick') and BBC2's Panorama ('Disabled or Faking it').

This year, as a writer, I have been made painfully aware of how distressing, unreliable and costly – both physically and emotionally – the Work Capability Assessment is for those undertaking it. The financial cost to the country is another concern altogether.

I am aware that Employment minister Chris Grayling has made much capital from blaming Labour for the introduction of this system, administered by ATOS. Equally, Mr. Grayling has made it clear that he views the Coalition's implementation of the process as preferable, and less harsh, than that carried out under the Labour government.

WCA, clearly, is beset with problems. The ATOS assessor, captured undercover in C4's programme, referred to it as 'Toxic'. It was made clear that it was designed to reduce benefit recipients. Chris Grayling continues to deny there are targets. I am less inclined to believe him. The test, at best, is unquestionably inadequate and not fit-for-purpose. Even the Government's own adviser, before he resigned, described it as 'patchy'. At worst, it is downright disadvantageous to those who are subject to it.

For many people the horror of the ATOS test has been the worst kept secret for years. Sadly, others have been less fortunate and are no longer here to register their misery. There currently exists a known demographic of people who have died after being found 'fit to work'. Are you aware of this? This year doctors at the British Medical Association have opposed WCA. Those who endure it have opposed it. Even the occasional newspaper and TV programme dares to oppose it. As a Social Commentator, I certainly have.

Why, then, has Labour – under your leadership – not opposed it? Should I assume that you support it? I am disturbed by what I view as a dangerous trend in our country. There is a clear demonisation of sick and disabled people, routinely labelled as 'scroungers' by the media, and driven by frequently skewed statistics issued by the DWP.

Meanwhile, the incidences of attacks on sick and disabled has risen. Disabled people are more in fear for their safety than at any other time in recent history. I believe that there is a direct correlation between the resentment whipped up about 'spongers' and the physical assaults taking place. Surely this is not acceptable to you. It certainly isn't acceptable to me. The names listed below this letter are from people who support the core message contained within it. Like me these are concerned citizens. Some are directly affected by issues of sickness and disability, others are not.

For my part, I am healthy, able-bodied and work full-time but I believe it is my duty to support those who need help. I believe that is a duty of us all. Including the Labour party. Sickness and disability can happen at any time and to any one of us. I would like to think that others would also support me in my hour of need.

I believe what we need in this country is more compassion, not less. The WCA is unacceptable for a progressive country and it is a clear failure. The money spent on the appeals process confirms that, quite aside from the human misery it costs.

I have just heard that Tom Greatrex, MP, has secured a Westminster Hall debate on September 4 with regard ATOS and WCA. I ask you, Mr. Miliband, can we count on you to take a long overdue stance in support of our sick and disabled, too?

I do hope so. I look forward to your response.

Best wishes,
Sonia Poulton

Signatories: If you'd like to co-sign Sonia's Open Letter, please go to:

<http://ramblingsofafibrofoggedmind.wordpress.com/2012/08/01/open-letter-to-ed-miliband-please-add-name-and-postcode-if-you-agree-with-contents/>

or on Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/notes/margo-milne/sonia-poultons-letter-to-ed-miliband/10150941223062371>