

Sometimes lower pay is better for the disabled

We're letting down thousands of people with learning difficulties if we price them out of work with the minimum wage

Libby Purves



@LIB_THINKS

It reads like a cry from the heart, and should be heeded. Rosa Monckton and Dominic Lawson have a daughter, Domenica, with Down's syndrome. Because they are strong-minded professional "alphas" — he in journalism, she a former chief executive of Asprey & Garrard and friend of Diana, Domenica's godmother — the couple have been useful flagbearers for any parents facing the bewildering fact that their baby has a lifelong learning disability. There is a particularly lonely and dispiriting moment when your loveable child moves into adulthood and the question rears up: what now? How can he or she fit into the world, fill their day, join the community?

Ms Monckton, as her daughter grew up, strode towards that problem. She founded Team Domenica, a training centre, café and employment agency. The charity helps young adults with learning disabilities, not just Down's, to find

jobs and keep them. Pictures and tales from the Brighton centre shimmer with purposeful merriment. An earnest young man relates his delight in serving customers, a girl muses; "I've got skills inside me!", an employer marvels at the newcomers doing a simple job sealing packets; "They're enthusiastic, keen, so honest ... a joy."

It turns your heart over, but going "aaah!" is not enough. Last week Ms Monckton made a brave proposal to further the chances of the million-plus British citizens with a learning disability and no job. The education system often serves them well, but once you leave college chances are few, and unemployment means "a

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life in the shadows, slumped on the sofa, watching daytime television". A job, however basic, means company, usefulness and stimulation. It is an obvious good thing. Policy papers nod approvingly.

Nothing actually changes. The green paper *Improving Lives* promised personal support and coaching but only applies if the young person is in paid work. That's

where things collapse. The minimum wage is going up to £7.05 an hour, £7.50 if you're over 24. With brisk practicality Ms Monckton says "employers are not charities, and it is difficult for them to employ people if their output amounts to a loss". As a parent, businesswoman and mentor she accepts the reality of the candidates' limitations if you view them as productive units. And face it, that is how employers have to think. Some of Team Domenica's graduates may only manage up to 15 hours a week, and need managing, recording, supervising.

Sticking her head in the lion's mouth, she says flatly that we need a therapeutic exemption from the minimum wage. Most people involved, she points out, will be living with parents or in sheltered communities and have benefits help. Some — not all — don't quite understand money. Domenica Lawson got a £5 tip on a work placement and asked if she could go to New York on it. To pay them less than the minimum wage would not damage their lives; giving them work at all would enhance it. QED.

Make any such suggestion and you will be closed down with savage and uncharitable violence. In 2011 the MP Philip Davies nervously said that "for some people the national minimum wage may be more of a

hindrance than a help" and carefully suggested that if, on the first rung of the ladder, someone wanted to take a lower rate "we should not stand in their way". Charity leaders piled in, yowling that he devalued mentally disabled people. One claimed that they could contribute "as much to a workplace as anyone else", which is not universally true. A Labour MP sobbed about "second-class citizens", *The Mirror* said "slave labour". More

Voices of experience get shouted down by formulaic pieties

recently Lord Freud replied to a question from someone trying to employ keen "mentally damaged individuals who to be quite frank aren't worth the minimum wage". Freud incautiously echoed the questioner's phrase about worth, and got monitored by Mencap, Miliband and the rest.

It is not uncommon. Parents and carers who have lived for years with the reality of protecting, loving and teaching mentally impaired young people get reproved by indignant lobbyists who haven't. The would-be workers themselves, with Down's or any other problem, aren't consulted. Ms Monckton now gets shrill, nasty

trolling because of what she humanely wrote, and sadly responds: "Yes, we are all equal in that we share a common humanity, but some are more vulnerable than others, and it is our duty to look after them, and to enable them to participate in society as much as possible."

To consider a careful, legally overseen derogation from the minimum wage to benefit people with serious learning disabilities is not "slave labour". Effectively denying them the fulfilment of work by making them unaffordable just sends them back to that dreary sofa — many day centres, of course, are closing. Unemployment tells those people, as a slightly lower pay rate would not, that for all their warm hearts and willingness they are a nuisance: left out and lonely.

In a small village such a young person can run errands, help in a family shop and be accepted like anyone else. In a rural farming community unofficial, simple jobs provide purpose and usefulness. But in a complex rule-bound urban society breaking into the workplace is far harder. When the voice of close experience gets shouted down by formulaic pieties, it only suggests that it is Ms Monckton's harsh opponents who believe, deep down, that money is the only accurate measure of a human being.

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