Would We Choose This for Ourselves?

What the youth unemployment debate reveals about distance, categories and human value

Adam Tugwell | 18 November 2026



The debate surrounding the Milburn Review has quickly become one about welfare, work and youth unemployment.

Supporters argue that too many young people are being left behind and that intervention is long overdue. Critics question the impact on disabled young people, the viability of the proposals, and whether the promised outcomes can realistically be delivered. Those disagreements are important, and they deserve serious consideration.

Yet there is another question sitting quietly beneath the entire discussion.

Not whether the proposals will work, whether they are affordable, or whether they represent good politics. Rather, it is whether the people designing solutions truly understand the lived reality of the people those solutions are intended to serve.

That question matters because the further we move away from lived experience, the more likely we are to mistake categories for people, systems for communities, and participation for fulfilment.

The Problem with Categories

The starting point of the review is the category.

NEET. Claimant. Economically inactive. Disabled young person.

These labels are useful from an administrative perspective. Governments need categories, researchers need categories, and policymakers cannot discuss millions of people individually. Yet there is a danger hidden within every category.

A category tells us what a person has been recorded as. It does not tell us what it feels like to be them.

Nobody wakes up in the morning experiencing life as a NEET, a claimant or a statistical classification. Instead, people experience relationships, responsibilities, embarrassment, anxiety, pride, hope, fear, uncertainty, belonging and isolation.

The category appears afterwards, usually attached by somebody else.

The moment we begin seeing categories before people, something important is lost.

The Things We Don't Understand

Several years ago, while researching the realities of poverty, I reached a conclusion that has remained with me since:

To begin understanding poverty, it is often necessary either to experience it yourself or to be touched by it closely.

That is not because people are uncaring. It is because human beings naturally struggle to understand realities they have never inhabited.

Many people know about poverty, but far fewer know what it feels like. The same is true of unemployment, disability, social exclusion, long-term insecurity, caring responsibilities and precarious work.

Most people encounter these realities through narratives rather than direct experience. The difficulty is that narratives simplify, while experience rarely does. A person can look at someone else's situation and unconsciously think, *"I would cope differently," "I would make different decisions,"* or *"I would find a way through."*

What is often missing from that thought experiment is the recognition that circumstances themselves change people. They affect confidence, agency, possibility and the horizon of what feels achievable.

People frequently imagine the situation without ever imagining its consequences.

The Distance Problem

This challenge becomes amplified when systems become increasingly centralised. Because by its very nature, centralisation of any kind creates distance between people.

Distance is not simply a physical phenomenon. It is a social one. A local person can know another local person; a family business can witness an individual's growth; a community organisation can understand context in ways that larger institutions often cannot.

A large system operates differently. Large systems require consistency, consistency requires categories, and categories require simplification. Over time, that simplification replaces lived reality with administrative representations.

The result is that human beings become visible primarily through the labels attached to them. Not because anyone intends harm, but because the system cannot function otherwise. Yet every additional layer of distance creates another opportunity for misunderstanding.

The person becomes less visible while the category becomes more visible.

Why the Employer Question Matters

One aspect of the review illustrates this particularly clearly.

The emphasis falls heavily upon large employers: national retailers, major hospitality chains and other organisations capable of absorbing large numbers of placements as a key part of ‘the solution’.

At first glance, this seems sensible. If the objective is scale, large organisations make delivery easier. They are easier to contract with, subsidise, monitor, evaluate and report on.

But ease of administration is not the same thing as human development.

If the genuine objective is confidence, belonging, capability, mentorship, responsibility and growth, then an obvious question emerges. Why are local employers not more central? Why not small businesses, family firms, independent trades, community organisations or specialist local employers?

The answer is probably not ideological. It is probably administrative. Large employers fit more comfortably within the logic of a large system.

Yet that reveals something important. The intervention starts to look less like a search for the best human environment and more like a search for the most manageable administrative environment.

This distinction matters because it tells us something about the limitations of the system itself.

The Question Beneath Participation

The review assumes that participation is the answer.

Work, training, education, engagement, support, participation requirements, opportunity guarantees, named advisers and subsidised placements all point towards the same objective: participation.

Yet participation is not the same thing as independence. It is not the same thing as dignity, belonging or agency.

A person can participate whilst remaining insecure. A person can work whilst remaining unable to build an independent life. A person can comply with every expectation placed upon them and still feel disconnected from their future.

The assumption underlying many activation-based policies is that once people enter work, everything else follows. Confidence, independence, purpose and stability are expected to emerge naturally.

Sometimes that is true. Increasingly, however, many people are unconvinced. Not because they reject work, but because they can see the lives of people who already work. They can see housing costs, financial insecurity, stagnant living standards and limited progression.

There is a question that therefore becomes difficult to avoid:

If participation is the answer, what exactly is the destination?

What Would We Choose For Ourselves?

Perhaps the simplest test of any social policy is also the hardest.

Would we willingly choose the same pathway for ourselves? - Not as a temporary compromise or a stepping stone, but as a genuine expression of what a good life should look like.

Would we want our son there? Our daughter? Our partner? Our closest friend?

Would we look at the arrangement and think: *"Yes. This is a future I would be genuinely happy for someone I love to build their life around."*

If the answer is uncertain, we should pause.

There is an important difference between designing solutions for other people and designing futures we would willingly embrace ourselves.

The greater the gap between those two things, the greater the danger that policy has drifted away from humanity.

The Expansion That Changes Everything

The most revealing moment came not from the review itself, but from the suggestion that the same philosophy could eventually be applied across the age range.

That changes the discussion completely. The issue ceases to be a youth issue and instead becomes a question about how society understands support, work, welfare, participation and human value.

If the same approach is appropriate for people of every age, then the problem cannot really be one of youth transition alone.

The spotlight inevitably shifts elsewhere: towards the jobs market, towards independence, towards the relationship between work and security, and towards the nature of opportunity itself.

The questions become larger and considerably harder to avoid.

The Human Question

Ultimately, this is not an argument about welfare, nor is it an argument about youth employment.

It is an argument about distance. About what happens when those designing systems become increasingly separated from the realities of those experiencing them.

Every person possesses the same intrinsic human value, regardless of their circumstances.

The unemployed person, the disabled person, the young person struggling to find direction, the minister, the adviser, the policymaker, the economist and the employer are no more or less human than one another.

Yet systems built upon distance inevitably risk forgetting this. They begin seeing categories where there are people, cases where there are lives, and outcomes where there are experiences.

The greatest challenge may not be creating better interventions. It may be preserving our ability to see one another clearly.

Because once the category becomes more visible than the person, even the most well-intentioned solutions can start solving the wrong problem. And when that happens, humanity gradually disappears behind the language used to describe it.

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