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The betrayal of Gary McKinnon

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The 'hacker' with Asperger's was let down long before it was decided to extradite him to the US, like many other autistic adults
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Are aliens real? Does the US military think Gary McKinnon knows more than he says? Is there suppressed evidence of reverse-engineered UFO technology and "free energy"?

Sounds crazy but those were the questions I was left with after the home secretary, Alan Johnson, refused to stop the extradition of McKinnon – the autistic man accused of being "the biggest military hacker of all times" – despite McKinnon's severe and very real secondary mental health problems diagnosed by the top experts in the field.

What other possible logical explanation is there for refusing to stand up for this British citizen clearly in need of professional help? Is someone pressuring our government into making a decision that is so obviously wrong?

Our law stipulates that we must protect the vulnerable. I'm not saying that because of his autism he should get off scot free. McKinnon broke the law, he admitted computer misuse and he should be tried. But he has the right to be tried fairly, by a court that will take into consideration all his conditions. And that is not likely to happen if he is extradited to US, judging by its track record when it comes to trial and conviction of people with mental health problems.

Take this American case, for example: William Cottrell's Asperger's was not even allowed to be submitted during his trial in an environmental protest case, and even though he was acquitted on appeal on all charges but one – the conspiracy – he is still set to serve the majority of his 10 year sentence, with no allowance being made for his Asperger's and no support.

Or in the case of John Allen Muhammad – the so-called Washington sniper – being executed on 11 November this year, despite being diagnosed with schizophrenia and paranoid delusional disorder, with another judge refusing to take it into consideration.

In Britain, rather than execute the mentally ill, we often declare them unfit to stand trial, opting for intense medical treatment instead. If he should be tried at all, McKinnon should be tried in UK where he will have his conditions recognised by the courts.

And isn't it ironic how McKinnon was handed over to the US on Thanksgiving? Like some trophy, a "present". How can any logical person comprehend the action of our top minister to hand over someone who is losing his grip on reality and will be, according to his family, "at serious risk of suicide" when his support base is lost?

Johnson said he found arguments against Mr McKinnon's extradition "amazing". And recently, the home secretary insisted the latest medical documents submitted by McKinnon's lawyers didn't amount to "a fundamental change in circumstances" and disputed the diagnosis that McKinnon's condition had "dramatically deteriorated".

But the worst thing about it is that Johnson seems to completely miss the point that McKinnon has developed other impairments on top of Asperger's: he is clinically depressed and has paranoid delusions, as he actually believes in UFOs and aliens and is terrified that he'll be tortured by aliens once he sets foot in US. That fear alone may push him over the edge, away from his only support and tireless advocate – his mother, Janis Sharp.

One might argue: so where was she when he was lost to the world, locked away in his ex-girlfriend's aunt's spare bedroom, drinking and obsessively searching for information on UFOs? The same place where all the other mothers of people with autism are: trying to help her child, unqualified in autism but driven by sheer love for her son, by alternating reaching out to him and giving him space, as any "grown-up" is entitled to.

But she didn't reach him in time. The diagnosis came too late to help save McKinnon. It's a tragedy so many other families touched by autism will no doubt fear. Who is to say it won't happen to other autistic children? That it won't happen to my own son with

Asperger's?

As intelligent as they are, the lives of people with Asperger's are often blighted by disasters as they suffer greatly without the right support. This is often made worse by the lack of awareness among GPs and other health professionals and many go undiagnosed until major problems set in, like in the case of McKinnon: he was 42 when it was finally spotted and officially diagnosed, his intelligence and "good manners" masking a life-long problem. But even though the secondary mental health issues are common among unsupported autistic adults, not everyone with Asperger's will develop them.

Having Asperger's in society today feels like being a square peg trying to fit into a round hole, an outsider, often rejected, misunderstood and left behind.

The feeling I know only too well having been myself diagnosed with Asperger's in 2006 aged 35 and only just starting to receive minimal support. Because ignorance about the condition is so widespread among the very people entrusted to protect the vulnerable in society – the health professionals, the social services, the police.

I've had my "obsessions" to cope with stress but luckily mine weren't anywhere near as "dangerous" as McKinnon's (I had a fascination with building waste metal skips which lasted for two years and resulted in my being arrested for breaking into building sites to take photos of my "objects of obsession").

McKinnon should have been diagnosed much earlier and supported instead of abandoned and left to develop secondary mental health problems. Asperger's syndrome was recognised in 1994 after Lorna Wing's translation of the original paper by Dr Hans Asperger, who discovered it. The opportunity was missed for McKinnon to be diagnosed before he accessed Pentagon computers in 2001.

That's why I feel that McKinnon was betrayed long before Johnson refused to stop his extradition — Gary was failed, just like many other autistic adults are failed in this country.

Things are slowly improving for young children with Asperger's and more support is available at universities. But there are 635,000 people on the autistic spectrum in the UK alone, and we need a radical overhaul of the way the system treats people with all disabilities. Recently, the Tories made all the right noises about supporting disabled people into work and helping their families, and I hope they keep their word if they get into power. Certainly, it gives us all hope now that an autism bill championed by Cheryl Gillan MP has made it into parliament.

But it may be too late for McKinnon, the sacrificial lamb of our "system" that seems to punish the most vulnerable in our society.

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