

TUC Disability Conference, Congress House, London 20 May 2009

JONATHAN SHAW: Thank you very much for that introduction, Carol. Good morning, Conference, and thank you for inviting me to speak to you this morning.

Without doubt the trade union movement can be proud of its role, its important role in advancing equality for disabled people. You have always challenged us in government to be ambitious on these issues. To be ambitious for disabled people and the issues that affect disabled people's lives. We need to continue to be ambitious, more ambitious if we are going to tackle the challenges of today's economy and achieve our shared aim, our shared aim of a fair society based on social justice.

Government is quite clear that fairness will not be put on a back burner when times get tough. So I'd like to outline our plans today to support disabled people through the current challenges in order that we stay on track towards our aim of equality for disabled people by 2025.

Employment is key, of course. Work is the best route out of poverty - and employment means independence, which is vitally important. We know and we have known for a long time that employment is not an opportunity for all. That many disabled people don't have that opportunity. But we also know that with the right support many disabled people can work, they want to work

and they make a huge contribution to their organisations. Organisations realise the pool of untapped talent there is in our society.

Through our specialist disability employment services we have opened up new work options for many thousands of disabled people. We want to ensure that more disabled people get access to a wider range and a higher percentage of job opportunities.

Hands up who has heard of Access to Work? Hands up who has not heard of Access to Work? One, two, three, okay.

People have said to me that it's the Government's best kept secret. I've been asking audiences where I've been attending conferences who has heard of it and asking people to raise their hands in a similar way I've just asked you. The vast majority of people have heard of it. Make sure, all of us, that it's not a secret, that people know it's out there, because it helps enormously. That is why we have announced a doubling of the Access to Work budget over the next five years and this year we have said there will be an additional £8 million to help disabled people into work and to stay in work during this economic downturn.

It's not just about providing the extra funding. We are continuing to look at ways to improve our support, to reach out to more people, to people who are furthest from the labour market. So in November last year, we launched the flexible Access to Work pilot here in two boroughs in London in conjunction with Mind, the mental health

charity, to assist people with fluctuating mental health conditions to move into and retain paid employment.

We are also working across government to develop a new mental health employment strategy to tackle the stigma and ignorance that still persists around mental health conditions. One in six of the adult population suffer from a mental health condition. It's vital we find better ways to help those people into work and retain work.

Shortly we will also be publishing an employment strategy for people with learning disabilities, who for far too long have experienced an employment rate that is far below other groups of disabled people. We have begun by trialling Project Search, an initiative born in America. I have seen the pilot programme in Norwich, and met the people going through the programme.

There's a story I heard in America about a hospital where people with learning disabilities were employed. It's about one of the workers, a young woman with Downs Syndrome, whose job was to ensure all of the personal hygiene cupboards were stocked. She was working one day in the maternity suite and went into a room where a mother had just given birth to a child with Downs Syndrome. The mother was going through that concern, the uncertainty, and in walked the worker, looked in the cot and said, "What a cute kid", and carried on her work and left. That transformed that mother's whole perspective. There she was, wondering what kind of future her child would have, and there she met a young worker with Downs Syndrome who had a life and a job and it changed the whole perspective for her.

So it's right we do more and we will be making announcements about how we can enhance programmes like Project Search so people with learning disabilities are able to fully contribute to our society.

Sometimes people say to me, "Well, given the economic downturn, should you be concentrating on helping disabled people into employment?" I say, "What is the alternative?" We saw the alternative in the previous downturns. People were put on incapacity benefit and left there for a generation. We are simply not going to do that and we will continue with our programmes.

I was encouraged when I went to North Lanarkshire a couple of weeks ago visiting their supported employment service. You will remember in the 90s when Ravenscraig was closed down, a huge employer, and everything it affected in terms of the supply side and local industries. Soon after, the Council took the decision to launch their supported service for disabled people. That remains an area of higher unemployment than many others across the country, but they have found more work for adults with learning disabilities than many others, many others where unemployment is a lot lower. The reason why is that the Council, working with partners and employers, managed to secure opportunities, making lives completely different, transforming expectations amongst those people.

Now, I know, looking at the agenda, that Remploy will feature. I have been pleased to develop my relationship with Remploy since

last October. They have helped around 7,500 people into work just last year while many of the people working in the factories don't have enough work to do. I visited them myself and it's not acceptable. There are motions that we need to do far more on public procurement. We have, but we have not done well enough. Working with the Prime Minister, we set up the cross-departmental Ministerial committee. Each Government Minister with a procurement department attends those meetings with their procurement managers and we are beginning to see new orders and I expect to see further orders coming on stream.

We need to use the public sector, the government sector, Whitehall, to provide jobs for colleagues in the Remploy factories and I continue with my commitment in that area.

On welfare reform, we will continue to press ahead with this agenda. I've talked about what happened in previous downturns where people were left languishing on incapacity benefit. We need to look at what people can do, rather than what they can't do. No more mistakes of the past.

But we do want to make sure people take up their rights for benefits. The number of people claiming Disability Living Allowance has risen last year. We recently announced that severely visually impaired people will have the higher mobility rate from 2011.

These reforms need to be underpinned by a rights agenda. This Government has delivered the biggest extension of disability civil

rights the country has ever seen and we want to build on that progress. That is why, Conference, we have introduced the Equality Bill into Parliament. Through this Bill we will streamline the law, reducing seven pieces of legislation into a single Act, making it easier for people to understand who is protected by the law and who needs to comply with the law.

It's quite clear there will be no erosion of existing levels of protection and we are clear the new public sector equality duty will not water down the existing disability equality duty. Instead, we want to take the opportunity to strengthen the law and tackle discrimination where it still exists. We will take steps to strengthen the protection for people with mental health conditions who find it hard to show they meet the legal definition of disability.

The Bill is a testament to how far we have come on the disability agenda; progress in which the trade unions have played a vital role. A range of organisations have welcomed the Bill, which shows how support for equality is now on the mainstream agenda. Organisations including Business in the Community, the CBI, the Employer's Forum on Disability - they have all welcomed the Bill, the latter saying that it has the potential to deliver real benefits for both disabled people and employers.

So, as we have already moved forward on employment measures, on welfare measures, on equality measures, we also need to transform the way that we provide support to disabled people by bringing forward the Right to Control, taking the different funding streams of support and bringing those into individual accounts, into

single budgets so disabled people can make the choice of how they utilise that money.

We will be publishing soon our consultation for the pilots of the Right to Control which we expect to happen around the country next year, and the TUC I'm sure will be taking part in that consultation.

One can envisage a situation whereby, rather than just being a passive recipient of what the council says you can get, the power will lie with the individual and it's the individual disabled person who is able to choose and shape their services.

Now, Conference, it's important that we don't take these decisions in isolation. The Government can put laws in place, but it's for all of us to work together to make equality a reality. It's not just about changing practices. It's about changing our aspirations, changing our cultures and setting our sights even higher. It's about outcomes and fairness and it's about us choosing to make society a better place for all of us. I hope that this trade union movement, the representatives here in this room today and the colleagues that you represent, and the Government, can all work for and achieve those aims together. Thank you for listening.