

**UNISON Conference
Blackpool
1 November 2009**

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Good afternoon, thank you chair, conference it's a pleasure to be here. Around 12 years ago when I was a UNISON steward and a social worker working for Kent, never did I think I would address a conference as Minister for Disabled People. I am very proud to be here today. Now I am no longer a steward, I am no longer a social worker, I probably lost a lot of hair along the way, but nevertheless I am a proud member of UNISON. Some of the things I want to talk to you about today are things that delegates and the union can be very proud of, because they are things the union campaigned on to make a difference to disabled people's lives.

Now it's nearly 40 years since Alf Morris introduced the Chronically Sick and Disabled Person's Act, which was not just a groundbreaking piece of legislation for this country, but also for the world. It was the first time the rights of disabled people and services have been enshrined in law, making a huge difference. The principles that the Bill was based on were the principles of social justice, jobs, quality public services, all of the principles that UNISON campaigns on. Principles that I concentrate on in my ministerial role to ensure that we fulfil our ambitious goal of equality for disabled people by 2025. In 2005 the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit published a report on the Life Chances of Disabled People in which we committed to equality by 2025. I chair a committee of ministers with disabled people acting as advisors to look at the work streams we have across government to ensure we are reaching that goal.

Now this audience knows better than most that setting out the broad vision of a fairer society and the day-to-day reality are not always the same. The challenges that we have in turning the vision into a real and lasting difference on the ground is hard work. One of the greatest challenges today is the economic climate, and ensuring that disabled people increasingly have access to a wider range and a higher percentage of job opportunities.

I want to talk about those challenges today, but I think it's important as well that we take a couple of minutes to reflect on some of the differences that we have been able to make together. In the 80s and early 90s we saw a massive rise in incapacity benefit. We must never allow that to happen again. In 1998 only around 39% of disabled people were employed. We have improved upon that. We cannot have a situation though when we face an economic downturn where people are simply told: here is incapacity benefit and we are walking

away, we are not doing anything else to support you. That is wrong. We need to provide people with assistance.

One of the challenges is about righting those wrongs of the 80s and early 90s, as well as ensuring that we have an effective rights framework. This Government has delivered the biggest extension of disability rights that we have ever seen in this country. The 2005 Disability Discrimination Act was the important final plank of a comprehensive and enforceable anti discriminatory rights framework. This year we ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Disabled People, a statement that disabled people have and should enjoy the same rights as others, not just for the over ten million disabled people here in the UK but for our contribution on the international agenda as well.

Now, the Disability Discrimination Act has undoubtedly driven and continues to drive a real change in the way that organisations approach disability. And our specialist disability employment programmes have opened up employment to thousands of disabled people. Our Pathways to Work programme since 2003 has helped 173,000 people to get into work in Great Britain. But of course, there is still a long way to go. Disabled people want to work. It is vital in this climate that we continue the impetus, that we redouble our efforts and not scale back.

On rights we want to go further. We have introduced the Equality Bill, to ensure there is a simple framework bringing together all of the equality rights and legislation into one bill. The bill streamlines equality legislation. It will introduce a socio economic duty, a groundbreaking duty which will require the public sector to consider addressing entrenched poverty and disadvantage when making strategic decisions - an important clause within that bill. When local authorities and public bodies are making those decisions, it will be an opportunity for UNISON members within the branches to be challenging those organisation to understand how they are carrying out the letter of the law. And the bill also strengthens the law to tackle discrimination where it still exists.

Now, if we are to break down barriers, if we are to reach that goal of equality by 2025, we do have to provide more practical support for people to gain a foot on the ladder, to get to the top, to reach their full potential. This means we need to change our programmes so that they aren't just one size fits all, they need a far more personalised approach. I would like to set out some of the things that we are doing. But an important point before I do, I was just having a conversation with Jean [Jean Sowley from UNISON] before we came in, talking about how we have seen an increase in the number of disabled students going to university. The figures are quite startling. When we came into office around 10,770 Disabled Students' Allowances were paid to HE

students in England and Wales and total expenditure was £13.3 million. In academic year 2007/08, the most recent year for which figures are available, the number of higher education students in England in receipt of Disabled Students' Allowances was 41,000 and total expenditure was £90 million a huge increase in the amount of money that we are using to support disabled youngsters, so that we can have more disabled youngsters moving into our businesses and getting through some of those glass ceilings that are clearly there.

We are also reviewing our specialist disability employment services to ensure they are more easily tailored to the needs of individual people. We have launched *Valuing Employment Now*, our employment strategy for people with learning disabilities. There are too few people with learning disabilities that get the chance to work, so we have set out an ambitious programme, including within the department where I am a Minister, which employs 100,000 people. My Department has committed to recruiting 400 people with learning disabilities, including people in my ministerial office. I think that public sector organisations who are seeking to promote employment opportunities for disabled people need to be more proactive and walk it rather than just talk it.

We have also dedicated £13 million to our new Fit for Work initiative to support people who become ill or disabled at work to stay in their jobs. As we take policy forward, it's an important area to explore further, that link between health and social care and employment, because often what people want to do is just get back to work. But in a timely way, so it's an area where we need to work with employers and education providers as well.

We have also increased the amount of Access to Work. We are doubling the Access to Work funding over the next few years to £138 million. Through that programme we are helping disabled people in their jobs, making an enormous difference. In September I travelled around Britain to talk to disabled people about their experiences, and I met a number of people who were benefiting from Access to Work.

I met a lady who was working in sales and she found herself in her 40s suddenly with epilepsy. Her job meant that she had to drive to see her clients, and she was the main bread winner for the family. Now, fortunately, when she went to hospital, her epilepsy nurse knew about Access to Work. I would not say that across the piece we have that awareness of Access to Work, but the epilepsy nurse directed her to the Access to Work person at Jobcentre Plus, and in a relatively short space of time a driver had been arranged for that lady so she was able to resume her job and obviously resume supporting her family.

The lady said that she had not heard of Access to Work. That is part of my job, to make sure more people hear about Access to Work. But not just me, it is for you and all of us to make sure people know about Access to Work. Because it makes an enormous difference to people's lives. As we take forward the Access to Work programme, we also want to engage employers about understanding the benefits of employing disabled people. There is a whole pool of untapped talent in our communities. A diverse work force is a good work force. A diverse work force is good for business.

Just recently I was in Liverpool working with Jobcentre Plus and Hilton Hotel, where they had opened a new Hotel as part of a regeneration site there, identifying youngsters who were long term unemployed including disabled youngsters. Jobcentre Plus worked with the Hotel to introduce those youngsters and many of them got jobs, including a young man who was deaf. So the Hotel was going to ensure that all staff had deaf awareness training. I said that wouldn't just be good for your staff but good for your business as well. Because deaf people will be your customers, and if you can provide them with a better service, not only will they come back, but tell other people as well.

Now, we are making progress in many areas. But one area where we need to make more progress is hate crime. We all read about Fiona Pilkington. Alan Johnson spoke about it during the Labour Party conference, the depression and the heinous situation that led to those people taking their lives. But what led to the depression was that Fiona Pilkington had no expectation that anyone would do anything about what she and her daughter were enduring on a day-to-day basis. That is completely unacceptable.

In September we produced a cross-Government Hate Crime Action Plan, and a few weeks ago I was here in Blackpool as part of my visits around the country, and I went to the Blackpool Centre for Independent Living, where they have formed a partnership with the police, disabled people and other agencies looking at how they can tackle hate crime on the ground. It's important that we have the high level strategies, but it's vital that we have operations in place at a community level. So that when somebody is experiencing even that low level hate crime, that type of abuse that happens day in day out, people know where they can go for help. Often it's that day-to-day harassment that then escalates into worse crimes, into the extreme crimes and then sees the type of thing that happened to Fiona Pilkington.

So today I have outlined some of the policies that we are taking forward. I think we have made good progress and I think that UNISON can be very proud of many of the achievements we have made. But there are further

challenges ahead of us. Whether it's on employment, whether it's on hate crime, whether it's on the range of work across government ensuring that we reach that goal of equality by 2025. I will keep championing the rights of disabled people in government, and I know that UNISON will keep challenging me. We will work together on this common agenda so we do indeed achieve that goal of equality. Thank you very much for listening.