

Lecture to mark the 40th Anniversary of the Chronically Sick and Disabled Person's Act 1970

**4 March 2010, 10.30am
Church House, London**

JONATHAN SHAW:

Good morning, and thank you very much Alf [Morris, Lord Morris of Manchester] and Tom [Clarke MP] for your contributions today. It is a great pleasure to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act amongst such distinguished guests.

Alf's passion for disability rights, his determination to improve the lives of disabled people, and the fantastic luck of getting first place in the draw for a Private Member's Bill, brought into being the first piece of legislation anywhere in the world to recognise disabled people. It was the first time anywhere in the world that anyone had attempted to enshrine in law the simple premise that disabled people had rights, and to set out what those rights were.

But the very fact that disability rights are no longer questioned, that policy discussions today are around how we ensure those rights are met, not whether they exist is, in part, down to the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act – and everyone who helped bring that legislation into being.

Within four years of the Act, we witnessed another world first, as we saw the creation of the role of Minister for Disabled People. Alf was the first person to hold that role, and I'm delighted to see here today colleagues who have also served in that office over the years.

We have come a long way since 1970. The Act was built on principles of compassion and understanding; and an assertion of the fundamental right to participate in society. Today, our approaches, and our principles, have matured. We have seen a shift in attitudes across society – including government. And that has led us to a commitment to total, full equality by 2025. In the early days, a dedicated few campaigned tirelessly for recognition for disabled people. Thanks to their work, we all now share the more sophisticated understanding that in order for this country to

thrive, we need to develop and utilise the skills and talents of disabled people.

When the Bill was introduced, it was the first time someone had asked disabled people, as Alf referred to in his speech, what they wanted. The first time someone had involved disabled people in developing the system which, at that time, ruled the lives of so many people. Today in Parliament, it would be unthinkable to develop any legislation that could affect disabled people without speaking to them directly – and rightly so.

This thinking is the foundation of our push for equality by 2025. By asking disabled people what equality means to them, the Government was able to develop Roadmap 2025. This is a framework that departments across government will use to guide their policy decisions in coming years.

But what does it mean, when I say “equality by 2025”? Far from an empty platitude, it is a concrete, tangible and specific commitment. Roadmap 2025 sets out fourteen areas where real improvements can be made. Taken together, these fourteen strands form a picture of true equality, which touches every aspect of modern life. This picture includes disabled people having the same choice, the same control, and the same freedom as any other citizen, whether at work, at home, or in the wider community. It means an end to someone’s impairment preventing participation in employment, education, or recreational activities. It means valued civic involvement. Crucially, it means that not only will disabled people expect the same opportunities as non-disabled people, but the whole of society will have these expectations for them as well.

We are looking forward to an age of real equality. The themes laid out by Roadmap 2025 are helping us get there, and bringing it within our reach – and of course all of you will be monitoring our progress at every stage, particularly Baroness Jane Campbell, who is chairing the Independent Living Scrutiny Group.

It’s taken us 40 years from the creation of the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act to reach this point, to be in a position to be able to promise these things. Those years have seen hard work, and a lot of persistence – from many people here in this room - but they have also seen the realisation of credible milestones.

We've seen the strengthening of legislation, including the Disability Discrimination Act, the Disability Equality Duty, and the ratification of the UN Convention on Disability Rights. With the Community Care Act, it was recognised that disabled people should be part of the community and live independently. That's a principle we're building on through the Independent Living Strategy, the personalisation agenda, and the Right to Control – all important policies to ensure that disabled people have choice and control over their lives.

A huge part of living independently is, of course, participation in the world of work. Since 1998, we have seen an increase in the rate of employment among disabled people of around 10%. Something I've said before, and something I think we all believe, is that work is good for people and everyone should be able – where they can – to enjoy the rewards that work can offer. So that's why we are increasing the Access to Work budget. By 2013/14 it will rise to £138 million. Last year, Access to Work helped over 32,000 disabled people to get, or keep, employment. With this expansion of the budget, we'll be able to keep building on that success.

In September, I spent a week travelling around Britain meeting disabled people, and when I was in Newcastle, I met a lady called Marina. She was in her 40s, and one evening she found that she'd had her first epileptic seizure. She was a sales rep - she is a sales rep - and she was the main earner for her family. I'm sure you can understand the anxiety, the worry, of what would happen to her after that first seizure. She went to her local hospital and met with an epilepsy nurse, and the nurse said, "You need to find out about Access to Work". It was in a relatively short period of time that, with her Access to Work advisor, they'd arranged for her to have a driver to see her clients so that she could continue her work as a sales rep and continue to support her family. She asked me to tell that story as many times as I could, because she didn't know any disabled people, she didn't know about epilepsy, and she'd had no expectation that the state could assist her in that way. It's something that we should be proud of, that we're able to do that.

But, behind these figures, and behind these stories, we know that people with learning disabilities and people with mental health conditions remain too far from the labour market. They haven't seen the same kind of progress that other disabled people have experienced. That's why we will refocus some of the resources

from Access to Work to provide them with greater help. So from April this year, we will be guaranteeing a combined 3,500 places on the Access to Work programme for people with learning disabilities and mental health conditions.

These achievements stand as testament to the fact that times have changed. For some, however, this change has not been fast enough, and I completely understand that view. 1970 was just the beginning, the prelude to real reform. There is still work to do, not least in improving people's attitudes to disabled people. The high instance of hate crime is one of the strongest reminders of this. Two years ago, we were witness to an appalling crime, an example of the worst in hateful attitudes becoming manifest.

In October 2007, after years of torment, Fiona Pilkington killed herself and her daughter Francecca Hardwick. No-one having heard about the horrific treatment this family received would believe we have come far enough. For me, the most desperate thing about Fiona and Francecca's situation was that they had no expectation they would be helped. They believed they had no recourse to assistance, no recourse to support, no recourse to justice. That anyone can feel so ostracised and so isolated within our society is a tragedy, and, in my own belief, an avoidable one.

So it's for people like Francecca, who are persecuted purely for being disabled, that we must not renege on our commitment to equality. It is for all of the disabled people who have suffered taunting, abuse and violence because of their disability that this is a commitment to real equality – a change in attitudes and behaviour as much as it is about the practicalities of access to buildings.

This shocking and distressing episode serves as a harrowing reminder of the work that still needs to be done. We can't underestimate the seriousness of the truth it exposes, nor fail to recognise the lessons it imparts. But equally, we must not overlook or disregard signs and evidence of real progress where we find them.

In 2008, we saw an example of the best of positive attitudes being displayed on a national level. It was the year that brought us the Beijing Paralympics. Here in the UK, viewing figures reached the

unprecedented height of 13.2 million people. It made a star of Ellie Simmonds and inspired a generation of young disabled people.

I attended the celebratory event in Trafalgar Square, where Paralympic athletes were welcomed home as sporting heroes. They were celebrated not because they were disabled, not because they had overcome adversity, but for their amazing talents and sporting prowess. Here was proof that attitudes had shifted, that times had begun to change.

At that event, looking back across the years to 1970, the distance we have covered was substantial, and its growth is something that must be sustained, because in just two years time the Olympics and Paralympics will come to London. This is a moment for our country to shine, not just in terms of fantastic athletes, or gold medals – because, during this time, the world's eyes will be on London. It is the perfect chance for us to set a leading example to the global community, to show what's possible, and what's necessary.

In our bid to host the Games we set out a vision to set new standards for services, facilities and opportunities for disabled people. We committed to hosting 'the most accessible Games ever'. The Games will help us create meaningful and lasting change, they'll help us to influence attitudes and perceptions of people, to change the way they think about disabled people. They'll increase the participation of disabled people in sport and physical activity, promote accessible and inclusive businesses, and improve the provision of accessible transport. I'm sure you'll all agree the Games present a wonderful platform, an unprecedented opportunity, from which to effect real change. They represent the catalyst needed to put in place the shift in attitudes I've mentioned as being so important to change behaviours.

So, what next? Well, setting a world-leading example will be a crucial element of our progression towards 2025. Over the coming years, the world will continue to get smaller. The successes we witness domestically will be devalued if we don't see the rest of the world matching our progress. We will need to take a prominent role in the post-2025 world, to ensure that true equality is guaranteed around the globe. The UK took a proactive lead in the build up to the UN Convention on Disability Rights. We recognised the need for an explicit international statement, a benchmark for

human rights standards around the world. By sharing our best practice with our UN partners, we'll use our influence to uphold the Convention, to maintain the standards that it sets, and to pave the way for the years ahead.

These years ahead will not be without their difficulties, however. New thoughts, beliefs and ideas are constantly appearing and jostling for place. As attitudes and expectations shift, so too do perceptions alter. Reasonable adjustments is one such area where things are bound to change. How will the perception of "reasonable" change as the expectations and attitudes of society progress? Will there be a difference in what is seen to be the right balance between business interest, economic sense, and the need for participation?

By fulfilling the Olympic Legacy, we'll demonstrate to the world what can be done, and what needs to be done, to achieve this balance. In this way, 2012 will serve as a vehicle, through which we can rapidly accelerate progress towards the goals we have set for transforming the lives of disabled people.

The birth and infancy of disability rights in this country were the result, as I've said, and other have said, of years of hard work by a dedicated few. With Roadmap 2025 in place, and the Olympics on the horizon, we are entering a new era of acceleration.

We've been educating more and more disabled people to higher and higher standards. This will reach, soon, a tipping point, the effect of which will be increased numbers of disabled people in high profile positions. In turn, this will raise the expectations of the next generation, and so we shall see greater and greater returns for our efforts. Once in motion, these forces will not stop: the huge momentum and passion that I see to continue righting wrongs and battling prejudice, show no sign of abating. I know that with the enthusiasm and dedication of everyone fighting for disability rights behind it, the vision of equality by 2025 is not a fantasy, it is an inevitability.

The variable in the equation is how quickly we get there. We need to work together, to raise expectations, to bring down barriers, and ensure that all the hard work of the last 40 years hasn't been in vain, to fulfil all the potential of 1970. It will require persistence, perseverance and purpose.

But the challenge is clear, the difficulties are plain, and all of the people here, we will work together, and I have no doubt that in 15 years time, we will be able to look back on today as we celebrate the achievements of the 1970 Act, we'll be able to look back, knowing with some satisfaction that we have achieved everything we set out to do.

Thank you for listening.