

Achieving equality and social justice – a future without disability?

Speech by Bert Massie, 30th January 2006

I'd like to begin today by welcoming you all to Westminster Central Hall.

This building has played host to many of the great leaps forward in human liberty, equality and social justice during the 20th century.

In 1914 the suffragettes met here.

Here in 1940 General de Gaulle announced to the world the foundation of the Free French movement.

Last year this building played host to events in support of 'making poverty history'.

Perhaps most famously, Westminster Central Hall was the chosen venue for the inaugural General Assembly of the United Nations in 1946.

Prime Minister Clement Attlee welcomed the UN to "this ancient home of liberty and order".

Yet it is only in the last few years that I, and others who use a wheelchair, have been at liberty to enter this building.

And even now our freedom is restricted.

But while I apologise for the rather convoluted route which some of you will have experienced in getting in today, on this occasion I make no apologies for our hosting this event here.

Because as I will set out today, this is where the issues I want to talk about belong.

At the very heart of Whitehall and Westminster.

Issues of liberty, equality and social justice.

People with impairments and long-term health conditions have always been with us and more than likely always will.

We need to accept this and meet the challenge of extending freedom and equality to all.

If we don't, everyone suffers.

The inequality experienced by disabled people affects us all.

It stands between this government and the ability to achieve its core ambitions for Britain.

Despite positive steps in some areas, public policy is in danger of leaving disabled people behind.

Today I want to map out a way forward which could break the cycle of inequality and low expectations which have led us to this point.

My argument is that successive governments have failed to break the cycle of low expectations that hold disabled people back. There is a lazy fatalism that still too often shapes perceptions that politicians and the media in particular have of disabled people.

Things have got better for some disabled people; but in important areas the distance between the living standards, opportunities and life chances of disabled people and the rest of the population has widened.

This is manifestly unjust.

Bad for individuals **and** bad for society.

We have to change if we want a country that is genuinely committed to equality and social justice.

That means a new approach to public policy and a new emphasis on enabling disabled people to participate fully in the civic and political life of modern Britain.

Today I want to set out precisely what that entails for Government, individuals and the disability community.

The Good Society

When the Chancellor recently gave a major speech on Britishness, he claimed this issue was important because: "You cannot, as a country face up to the huge decisions that you've got to make in the modern world - unless you have a sense of shared purpose, an idea of what your destiny as a nation is."

And I want to start the debate about where disability fits into our vision of ourselves as a country, where our diversity becomes a strength, where our differences do not divide us but enrich us as a nation.

Just as people met here in the past to agree their vision of the good society, so I want to begin today by setting out my vision of what life in Britain could be like for people with an impairment or long-term health condition - if we make the right choices about our future.

A future in which we accept that having an impairment or long-term health condition is a pretty ordinary aspect of human experience, not an extraordinary sign of human failure.

A future in which we break forever the link between having an impairment or long-term health condition and a life of restricted opportunities, poverty and unfulfilled potential.

A future in which we finally accept that discrimination and disadvantage in relation to a person's impairment or long-term health condition is as absurd as for gender or race.

A future in which society sees no alternative but to extend the practical means for achieving freedom and equality to all citizens.

In my vision of the good society, our response to people with impairments and long-term health conditions would be quite different.

We would not be surprised that a person can be a manic depressive and be at the top of their professional game.

That a person with a learning disability could make a brilliant parent.

That blindness is no barrier to holding high office.

That a child with special educational needs was heading towards high academic achievement at university.

And we would be in no doubt about the injustice of poverty, of people being left out, being denied dignity, being absolved of control over their own lives; of not being able to live their dreams or, through life's struggle, having no time to dream at all.

That is my vision of the 'good society'.

And it's one in which we all have a stake.

The vast majority of us will be affected by disability at some point in our lives, directly through personal experience, or indirectly through our families, friends and colleagues.

So if someone asks you if you are disabled, and assuming you are not, the most honest answer you could give is "not yet".

As you are listening today and perhaps thinking about your response, it might help to consider that it is very probable that you are thinking about your own future.

This is about our shared destiny.

I bet if you spend a few seconds now you will be able to think of someone you know who has an impairment or long-term health condition.

Perhaps it's a colleague who has taken quite a bit of time off work with stress.

Or an older relative complaining that they can't open jars anymore because of the arthritis in their hands.

Maybe it's the child in your kid's class at primary school who is autistic, or the mum with depression, struggling to get on to the packed bus in the morning.

It might be your uncle who has just found out he has diabetes or the friend or celebrity with breast cancer.

You might even know one of the survivors of the bombings on 7 July who had their lives so dramatically changed on that terrible day, who were not disabled when they awoke that morning but who by sunset had a whole different life in front of them.

I say this not, as journalists such as Rod Liddle have suggested, in the hope that through some process of magical osmosis I will be able to convince you that 'we're all disabled now' and this will of itself trigger some form of revolution.

Rather, I tell you this to underscore the fact that developing an impairment or long-term health condition **is** an ordinary part of life for most people.

Official statistics suggest it affects around 10 million Britons today.¹

¹ Adults in Britain covered by the DDA. Source: Family Resources Survey 2002/3 DWP

Yet, despite this, and for far too many, this life change still acts as a trigger for profound social and economic exclusion.

This is unnecessary and it must change.

Before I set out how change could be brought about, let me spell out the nature and the scale of the problem: why disability continues to exclude individuals socially and economically, why it perpetuates deep inequality of opportunity and denies fair life chances for all.

How we arrived here: society's perception of disability

It starts with our outlook as a society.

The legal academic Luke Clements has argued that many disabled people are still not considered fully 'ripe for freedom' in the same way as "women, serfs and southern blacks once weren't".

How else can one explain a doctor placing a 'do not resuscitate' notice at the end of a disabled person's hospital bed without their knowledge?

A judge granting permission for a disabled woman to be sterilised without her consent?

People with a learning disability not being able to determine where and with whom they live, simply because they can't get the support they require where they want it?

I do not really believe it is widely accepted that disabled people have the capacity to be equal.

And for this reason we do not fully recognise disabled people's circumstances as issues of injustice and inequality.

The disadvantage disabled people face is all the more ingrained and pernicious as a consequence.

It has quite simply become normalised.

It goes unquestioned.

If we do not recognise these circumstances as profoundly unequal, we do not respond to them in this way.

Despite recent developments, society still sees its best response to disability as care, welfare and charity - rather than equal rights, opportunities and citizenship.

Our instinct is to protect.

But in 'protecting' people we deny humanity rather than liberating it.

And in order to protect we can make people dependent.

To borrow from Amnesty International's new campaign, we need to 'protect the human' by extending freedom, respect, equality and dignity.

Society has chosen to see having an impairment or long-term health condition as the point at which people should be exempted from the ordinary responsibilities of citizenship.

Sometimes this is motivated by a sense of compassion.

At other times it is an overt lack of confidence in disabled people's abilities - for example in a particular job or to be a good parent - or because we are trying to protect ourselves or others.

But in doing so we have been oblivious to the impact this has on expectations and on access to the adjustments and support needed by many disabled people to actively participate in society.

Our historic approach to disability has institutionalised low expectations.

These in turn have institutionalised exclusion and fostered often inescapable dependency, compounding the low expectations which create such problems.

So when people develop an impairment or long-term health condition, their lives change dramatically.

Freedom is restricted. Control is lost. And status is diminished.

Poverty beckons. Well-being plummets. And social interaction lessens.

A sense of belonging decreases. The chance to develop and grow as human beings – and as equal citizens - slowly dwindles.

The social and economic costs to the disabled individual, and to society, are enormous.

The social and economic costs of exclusion

For example, someone on incapacity benefit is, contrary to the image generated by the media, living on a meagre £76 a week.

Four out of 10 people out of work are disabled.²

The rate of income poverty amongst working age disabled adults is double the rate for non-disabled adults. Thirty per cent are living in poverty – up 3 per cent in the last 10 years.³

There is now a higher incidence of income poverty amongst disabled adults than either children or pensioners.

Conversely, the incapacity benefit bill has grown to £12 billion a year.

Although some things are getting better for disabled people, something is going seriously wrong.

It needn't be this way.

The choice I put before you today is this.

In future, will we see the very existence of people with impairments and long-term health conditions in Britain as a sign of failure – something which undermines our notion of Britishness and which we would rather hide and deny? And in denying it fail to make provision so disabled people can play a full role in society?

Or rather, having finally accepted that human difference is human essence, will it be the exclusion and inequality experienced by people with impairments and long-term health conditions that we see as challenging our sense of shared purpose?

Our answer to this question will determine the course we now take.

In my view, the first option denies reality and causes untold damage.

For example, mental health problems are seen as the antithesis of British identity.

² Labour Force Survey, Spring 2005

³ Households Below Average Income, based on the Family Resources Survey. DWP As quoted by Palmer et al (2005) Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion 2005. Joseph Rowntree Foundation December 2005

They are seen as weakness.

“Mustn’t grumble.”

“Can’t complain.”

The Government’s Social Exclusion Unit report on mental health quotes a respondent as saying: “I feel too afraid to admit I’ve a mental health problem. The stigma and rejection are too hard to face.”⁴

A MORI poll last year showed that a quarter of British workers would be afraid to ask their boss for support at work if they developed an impairment or health condition.⁵

There are people who qualify for protection under the Disability Discrimination Act who go to work every day terrified to reveal aspects of their identity, for fear of being found out and losing their jobs.

Every day there are disabled people, and not only those with mental health problems, who **are** found out and lose their jobs.

And there are plenty more for whom the fear of being open about their situation leads them to being less productive than they could otherwise be.

In denying that impairments and health conditions are an ordinary aspect of human existence, we are directly contributing to social and economic exclusion, the costs of which we all bear.

Can we really stay in denial about who we are and still succeed as a nation?

The answer, clearly, is no.

Impairments and long-term health conditions are here to stay. They are part of the human condition.

They are a part of who we are and what shapes our lives individually and collectively.

Their nature may change over time, as science and technology develops, as environmental conditions change, as demographic patterns such as the age of our population shift, as humankind evolves.

⁴ Mental Health and Social Exclusion. Social Exclusion Unit , 2004

⁵ MORI/DRC 2005

But there is little chance of a future where they are not part of our lives in one form or another.

So let's say we manage to accept that impairments and long-term health conditions are part of who we are.

We must now decide what we want them to mean, for us individually and as a country.

I have already alluded to the frankly obscene levels of poverty experienced by disabled adults, and the costs to the country of disabled adults being out of work and on incapacity benefit.

This situation is also a central factor in relation to child poverty.

Sixty-eight per cent of families where neither parent works include at least one parent who is disabled.⁶

Studies suggest that over half of families with disabled children are living in or at the margins of poverty.⁷

Eighty-four per cent of mothers of disabled children are not working compared with 39 per cent of mothers of non-disabled children.⁸

In the global economy, Britain's competitiveness increasingly depends on our ability to lead the world in relation to knowledge and skills.

By 2020, if current trends continue, 40 per cent of jobs will require a degree-level qualification.⁹

In 2005, disabled people accounted for over a third of those without any qualifications at all – a figure that has changed little over the last eight years.¹⁰

Are our efforts to build a knowledge economy reaching disabled people? Can we afford for them not to?

⁶ Labour Force Survey Spring 2003 from Stickland H (2003) Disabled Parents and Employment background paper for the HMT/DWP seminar November 2003

⁷ See Disabled Children in Britain: a reanalysis of the OPCS Disability Surveys. Gordon et al (2000)

⁸ Family Fund Trust, 2002 and General Household Survey 2002

⁹ Projections calculated for the DRC by IPPR. Disability 2020 (unpublished)

¹⁰ Labour Force Survey Spring 2005 Great Britain

There are a million young people in Britain who are not in any form of employment, education or training – NEETs as they are called – a figure of understandable concern to ministers.

Disabled 16-year olds are twice as likely to be in this position as their non-disabled peers.¹¹

What does the future hold for them?

And if they're not at work or at college, what are they doing?

Does this depressing figure have anything to do with the fact that 60 per cent of those referred to youth offending teams have special educational needs?¹²

The Prime Minister recently launched the Government's 'respect' agenda.

I welcome all attempts to foster a culture of mutual respect and tolerance in our communities.

Successive studies have shown the disturbingly high rates of physical and verbal harassment disabled people, and in particular people with learning disabilities, experience in their daily lives.

A recent study found that the rate of physical attacks on disabled Londoners was twice that of non-disabled Londoners.¹³

Such experiences have profound effects on the well-being of victims.

Violence, or the fear of violence, circumscribes the opportunity to participate fully and live a fulfilling life.

Yet evidence, including the DRC's own report into hate crimes in Scotland, suggests that many disabled people have little faith in the institutions set up to protect them or to bring the perpetrators to justice.¹⁴

Unemployment, child poverty, skills, youth, safer communities and respect – successfully addressing the key challenges of public policy today rests on successfully addressing the circumstances of disabled people.

¹¹ 15 per cent of disabled 16 year olds compared to 7 per cent of non-disabled 16 year olds. Source: DfES Youth Cohort Study: The Activities and Experiences of 16 Year Olds: England and Wales 2004

¹² NACRO (2003) Missing Out

¹³ Another Planet? Disabled and deaf Londoners and discrimination. December 2003. Greater London Authority

¹⁴ Hate Crime against disabled people in Scotland: A Survey Report. 2004 Disability Rights Commission and Capability Scotland

Only by putting disability at the heart of public policy can public policy succeed both today and in preparing for the future.

My friend and colleague Jenny Watson, Chair of the Equal Opportunities Commission, recently pointed out that we continue to assume that the independence of older and disabled people relies on the unpredictability of unpaid work, provided overwhelmingly by female relatives.

This position is not sustainable in an ageing population where many women are choosing to live alone and not to have children.

She rightly asks who will undertake this task voluntarily in future and how public policy is changing to reflect these new realities.

Disabled people need personal assistance and support.

Women overwhelmingly provide that support in the absence of properly resourced social services.

That position is clearly unsustainable, and the goals of promoting gender equality and disability equality are increasingly entwined.

Just as disability is at the heart of dealing with the major challenges of today, it will have a huge part to play in shaping the future.

But for some reason, and despite all the facts, public policy makers are not generally thinking about disability.

It is something 'over there' for the specialists to deal with. Something to do with wheelchairs and ramps.

The Government is to be congratulated for the progress it has made in extending statutory duties to prohibit discrimination and promote equality of opportunity for disabled people.

These duties should help make the task of securing a more equal future and of embedding disability into mainstream public policy significantly easier.

But whilst we have established these duties on the statute book, there is still a major task ahead in translating them into everyday reality.

We have not yet seen progress in translating their approach across public policy.

In many of the areas I have outlined it is the failure, deliberately or by omission, to address disability which has led to the point where it now stands between Government and its targets.

By public policy makers failing to take disability to their hearts, disability is now, acknowledged or not, at the heart of public policy.

And whilst there have been some improvements in many of the areas I have highlighted – unemployment, child poverty, skills, crime – success has relied on going first for the lowest hanging fruit.

Millions of disabled people have been left behind by public policy and the costs to us all are far from negligible.

Flawed public policy

You can see this in the flawed reliance on institutionalised social care and the flawed approach to housing provision for disabled people.

Institutionalisation is already on the rise.

Since 1997 there has been an increase of 20 per cent in admissions to residential and nursing care for younger people with a learning disability; and 40 per cent for people with mental health problems.¹⁵

For some, our ambitions for their freedom are still circumscribed by notions born in the Victorian era.

Is it where you want yourself or your parents to end up?

Do we want a future in which many of us are left with no choice about where and with whom we live?

Or perhaps instead you will tolerate a system which allows you to stay at home, provided you are okay about having help getting up and going to bed only five days a week, or are content to go to bed at tea time?

A social services system which provides you with only life and limb support and no opportunity to participate and make a contribution to society?

A system that might keep you alive but not provide you with the means to live a life?

Is this just? Is it economically viable? Is it really the best we can do?

The housing we are building now needs to meet the requirements of future generations.

We are taking decisions now, the effects of which will be felt for at least the next 70 years.

This is why the Government's recent rejection of calls to introduce what is called the 'lifetime homes' criteria into the regulations governing the development of new housing represents such a significant failure in joined up government.

¹⁵ Health and Personal Social Services Statistics, National Statistics 2003 (data applies to the period 1997 – 2002)

Homes designed to this standard ensure optimum numbers of people can use them, including wheelchair users, and are designed to be easily adapted in order to mitigate changes in the life course without major costs.

Already, new housing in London must comply with this standard.

With an ageing population, why are we building houses that do not match the needs of the people who will live in them and which cannot easily be adapted as needs change?

How can this count as **sustainable** development?

Our future success is going to demand some far-reaching reforms and a change of approach in public policy across the board.

Breaking the cycle of lazy fatalism

We need to break this cycle of low expectations and neglect because it is this which continues to generate a lazy fatalism about the lot of disabled people in Britain.

We need to break this cycle for people like Anthony Ford Shubrook. Anthony is a wheelchair user who at 16 almost didn't get into his college of choice to do an IT course because the college refused to make the classroom accessible. Every Briton needs the chance, like Anthony, to get in, get on and go to university.

We need to break this cycle so that fewer people like Gaynor Meikle, a teacher who lost her sight and her job, find that having an impairment or health condition spells an end to their ability to contribute to British society.

We need to break this cycle so that a school that fails disabled children is considered to be a failing school.

We need to break this cycle so that Home Office programmes to promote active citizenship stop characterising disabled people as simply the objects of others' good deeds. Instead, disabled people need to be viewed as people who have a major part to play in improving our communities as active citizens themselves.

We need to break this cycle so that a non-disabled person without any qualifications doesn't still stand a higher chance of finding a job than a disabled person with a degree.

We need to break this cycle so that when a disabled person has their children taken away from them without the offer of appropriate parental support from social services it is seen as scandalous.

We need to break this cycle so that journalists like Andrew Gilligan cannot write disabled people off as a dispensable minority in defence of keeping the inaccessible Routemaster bus.

Andrew, we need to go to work too and we need a bus we can use to get there.

Only high expectations can shine a light on injustice.

And this challenges all of us to choose a course and to stick to it.

That won't always be easy.

As last week's Welfare Reform Green Paper reminds us, opposition to changes in the benefits regime affecting disabled people has a long history.

In the past, we were right to oppose benefit cuts that would have impoverished disabled people whilst failing to provide new ladders to opportunity.

But we must have the courage of our convictions now, in holding the Government to account not only for its reform of incapacity benefit – only part of the story – but also for ensuring that the changes really do raise expectations. Reforms must enable more disabled people not only to get a job – whether low paid or not - but to enjoy full access to the education and training which lead people into careers.

Welfare reform on the cheap will only deepen the cycle of low expectations that has caused so much harm over the last century.

The choice: preserve the status quo or fight for change

We too face a choice as a movement.

Do we want to fight for change or to retain the status quo?

And are we prepared to take risks in moving forward?

Because the disability community has in my view a huge amount to offer in defining that way forward and should not fear progress.

The destination I want us to move towards is a high expectations culture with the support to enable those expectations to be met.

Where we focus on promoting personal freedom, choice and control above basic levels of social protection.

Releasing potential above managing dependency.

And recognising and challenging injustice and inequality wherever it exists.

I believe the ideas generated by the disability community are coming of age and finding currency in mainstream debates around equality, social justice and citizenship.

Let me begin by saying a little about our approach to equality.

The core mission of the disability movement: equality and social justice

As one of the Prime Minister's favourite political philosophers, RH Tawney, rightly said, equality is not about treating everyone in the same way. It is about responding to different needs in the different ways which best suit them.

We have never preached equal treatment, because to treat everyone the same is to ignore their essential differences - with the perverse effect of creating inequality.

Equality of results is more important than equality of treatment.

It can take different treatment to provide equal opportunities.

This notion of a substantive form of equality has guided the evolution of disability rights.

It is now guiding the future direction of public sector reform – choice, diversity of provision and personalisation, for example.

It is why our anti-discrimination laws in relation to disability require employers, service providers and educational institutions to make adjustments both at the individual and institutional level.

This approach will, at the end of 2006, be helpfully augmented by new positive duties on the public sector to actively eliminate discrimination and to promote equality for disabled people.

To do so requires that we offer people a more equal start in life - and mitigate the inequality that emerges during key life changes - such as the onset of an impairment or health condition.

It involves giving people the practical means to improve their own life chances and removing the barriers that might stand in their way.

A new philosophy of life chances for disabled people requires an entirely new approach to public policy.

We need to empower people by improving their capability to enjoy freedom and giving them the choice to pursue opportunities.

Let me set out how I believe this should work in several key areas in the future, touching on the benefits system, social services and strengthening social capital.

Building people's capability

We know that poverty restricts freedom, choice and opportunity.

The poverty experienced by disabled people concerns not only a limited income but, on average, higher outgoings related to the costs of living with an impairment or health condition.

This financial poverty plays a major part in creating a poverty of experience – the inability to participate, to exercise choice and control, to live a fulfilling life.

One of the ways we have sought to mitigate the extra costs of living with an impairment or long-term health condition is through Disability Living Allowance.

However, take-up of the benefit is notoriously low.

We need to identify why this is the case. It may be that people are not able to find out about and access the benefit.

Increasingly the frontline of public services are being automated, including creeping use of the internet as the primary point at which citizens are expected to access services and entitlements.

In 2004, 37 per cent of people receiving Disability Living Allowance – roughly one million people in Britain – had never used a computer.¹⁶

How many of those who are not taking up the benefit would, if only they could use a computer and had access to the internet?

Those of you in the room who have managed to crack the enigma code and access Disability Living Allowance will be only too aware of the complexity in applying.

Some of the most excluded people in our country including those with a mental health condition or a learning disability may require the support of an independent advocate in becoming aware of and accessing their rights.

Is this really all that different to the way many would use a financial adviser if they were shopping for a mortgage or pension?

In improving people's life chances we need to mitigate the costs of disability by improving take-up of Disability Living Allowance.

We therefore need to invest in IT skills and access to new technologies, and we need effective networks of independent advocacy, information and advice, which put choice and control into the hands of the individual.

We need to find ways to build people's individual capability, including through the support available to them, to take control over their own destinies - if we are to expand the numbers enjoying real freedom and choice.

Disabled people in control of their own destinies

Doing so also requires a significant re-drawing of the contract between disabled people, the state and society.

The disability community can lay claim to having led the way on securing direct payments which allow people to take money in lieu of social services and to employ their own personal assistance and support.

Where successful, direct payments have transformed lives.

¹⁶ Electronic Government at the Department for Work and Pensions: Attitudes to electronic methods of conducting benefit business. DWP Research report 176

To quote Julia Winter, a disabled woman: “With direct payments, you can say, ‘It’s a lovely day. Let’s not worry about the housework. Let’s go out!’ You can be spontaneous. You can live.”

No longer grateful and passive recipients of care, faced with the unreliability of inflexible services.

Instead, the employer - free to define how to live your life.

Power and control in the hands of those previously relegated to being objects of care.

We need to build on this and find other ways to redistribute control to individuals.

One way the Government is looking to do this is through piloting ‘individualised budgets’ and we hope the pilots work well enough to convince the Treasury of their value ahead of the 2007 spending review.

I should add a brief caveat here – that being in control can also involve making the choice to relinquish control.

But that choice to give control to someone else is something all should enjoy equally.

We need to explore further options.

This is not simply about the way we access services but also about people’s security.

Disabled people are far less likely to own their own home, and so lack the financial security such an asset can offer.

How else can we increase opportunities for people to build assets, escape poverty and take control over their own lives?

Building social capital and transforming expectations

As I have said, to promote equality we need to transform expectations.

In 1984 a paper from the United Nations World Programme of Action on Disability stated that: “As disabled people have equal rights, so they should have equal obligations. It is their duty to take part in the building of society.”

Are we yet ready to say that along with equal rights come equal responsibilities?

To do so we need to be sure that our public policy and programmes are all seeking to promote disabled people's active participation in family, community, economic and cultural life.

That they are driven by high expectations.

Only through disabled people playing an active part across life will society's attitudes and expectations shift.

Taking on more responsibilities is part of the journey to equality.

Disabled people's active and recognised participation is part of the process of building support amongst the wider community for the re-deployment of resources towards this goal.

Participation also brings interaction between disabled and non-disabled people, which helps build the capacity of communities to extend membership to groups previously left out.

We need to think about the role the voluntary sector can play in this process.

Organisations of and for disabled people may be effective at bonding social capital – bringing individuals with similar experiences together to assert control over their own lives.

They must also contribute to 'bridging social capital' – breaking down the barriers that exist between disabled people and the wider community.

To help us on our journey towards equality we need to make full use of the tools that help us to challenge discrimination and inequality.

Equality at the heart of policy making

We need to shout when disabled people are left out and forgotten.

Like the deaf children who face inequality because the Government has decided to teach literacy in primary school using phonics.

Did it think about deaf children when it decided this policy?

How will it mitigate the impact of this decision for them?

Can we be certain that the Education White Paper won't also create new inequalities?

The DRC would be more than happy to work with the Department for Education and Skills in ironing out any potential risk that this could be the case.

Our institutions have a major role to play in advancing equality and social justice.

As well as providing services to individuals, they are an expression of our shared purpose.

They embody and transmit the values of society.

As we design and develop new institutions – sure starts, extended schools, city learning centres, health walk-in centres – we must design, run and maintain them with the expectation and ethos that they are there to serve the whole community.

They are a place where people meet and interact with one another.

And the institutions we build now will echo our values down the generations.

Just as the institutions of the past speak of disabled people's exclusion, so the institutions we build for the future should speak of their full inclusion at the heart of our society.

Disability in the CEHR

A major new institution to come is the Commission for Equality and Human Rights (CEHR).

This new Commission will replace the Disability Rights Commission, the Commission for Racial Equality and the Equal Opportunities Commission.

It is not, as some understand, a merger.

That is why we are so keen to set an agenda now – to ensure it builds on our work and can be a genuine step forward for disabled people's rights.

And it is why we have fought so hard for a dedicated committee on disability, with executive powers, within the forthcoming CEHR.

Not, as some suggest, to keep disability outside of the Commission's main business but rather to make sure that disability can never be left out.

The committee will be there to make sure the new commission does not fall prey to the low expectations culture I have talked of today.

Conclusion

We want to build an agenda that all can support and from which all can benefit:

- A new account of disability which accepts that having an impairment or long-term health condition is an ordinary part of the human condition.
- An end to lazy fatalism and the emergence of a high expectations culture.
- People equipped with the practical means and support to take control and play an active part in society.
- Discrimination and injustice laid bare and challenged wherever it exists.
- Communities with the capacity to include.
- Disability equality firmly embedded across public policy and our institutions, and a CEHR that builds on the DRC's achievements.

In the emerging consensus around the importance of social justice, the role disability plays needs to be fully acknowledged if policy and programmes are to succeed.

There has long been a phrase used by the disability movement – “nothing about us without us”.

Yet too much of society has continued to evolve without our full involvement.

The sort of transformational change we need will only come if we redress the ability of disabled people to participate fully in the civic and political life of our country.

So today I want to finish by laying down three challenges to begin this journey.

That in order to increase the representation of disabled people in Parliament, our main political parties will introduce a rule that at least one candidate for all vacant seats has to be disabled.

That in order to increase disabled people's representation in public life, the Commissioner for Public Appointments will work towards a target that 20 per cent of public appointments should be disabled people or people with long-term health conditions – reflecting our representation in the community.

That in return for winning contracts to deliver public services, voluntary and private sector organisations must demonstrate how they will ensure disabled people are playing an active part in the leadership of their organisations.

Three steps on the way towards the sort of future I want.

A future without disability.

Because disability signals our failure to have dismantled the barriers which stand in the way of a more equal and just society.

A society in which we accept that it is not our differences that make us unequal but our failure to acknowledge and accept them.

A society in which we extend to one another the same high expectations and the means to realise our full potential.

A society which moves forward together; in which all play their full part; and where no one is forgotten or left behind.

This is your future as well as mine.

It's time to choose.

Thank you.

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