

Ready to work, skilled for work: Conference Overview Transcript

Jon Snow:

Good morning everybody and welcome to the QEII Conference Centre. It's very evident that everybody is living up to the title of this conference, clearly 'ready to work', clearly 'skilled for work' and clearly 'prepared to unlock Britain's talent'. And I am delighted to introduce James Purnell in what I think we could regard as his first outing as Secretary of State for Work and Pensions.

James Purnell (Secretary of State for Work and Pensions):

Thank you to all of you for coming today and thank you for your commitment. Your commitment to helping people into work, your commitment to helping them raise their skills. Now we need more employers to offer jobs to those out of work. To invest in apprenticeships. To boost our economy by giving everyone who can work the chance to work.

Our goal is a welfare state that is a way out of unemployment and a way out of poverty, and a skills approach that is a way up the career ladder and up the pay ladder, but not a welfare state that is a way of life.

And that means tackling inactivity. Our goals are ambitious – 1 million people off incapacity benefit, 300,000 more single parents at work and 1 million more older workers. That means using the best provider, whether they are from the private, public or voluntary sectors.

That is the idea of welfare that, as Secretary of State, I will seek to promote, social justice through independence, not a socially regressive culture of dependency. Thank you very much.

Jon Snow:

It's a measure of how importantly you take it that there are many Chairmen and Chief Executives here amongst them BT, Macdonald's, but it's a measure of how importantly the Government views this issue and what they seek to achieve for the Prime Minister himself Gordon Brown is here to speak to us.

Gordon Brown (Prime Minister):

Can I say first of all that I am delighted to join you today to thank every employer represented here for what you are doing, not only to get people into work, but also to train people for the challenges of the future. And I want us to celebrate the achievements of employers up and down the country and every region of the country as we make a reality of what I believe is a shared vision that the British people will share – a of a Britain equipped for the future with a highly skilled workforce, working for prosperity, not just for some of the people of Britain but for all.

Because our aim is together to reform our welfare system and to help move more benefit claimants into work as James has just described to ensure British young people but also adults have the best skills for the jobs of the

future and to give everyone in employment the chance to make the most of their potential including an unprecedented expansion in apprenticeships.

Britain's imperative is to compete in high value added, high skill services and manufacturing, and that requires us to continuously upgrade and up skill, unlocking not just some of the talent of some of our young people but unlocking where possible all the talent of all our young people.

The importance of constant reskilling is something that you understand so that we can successfully compete with the best in the world. And the biggest barrier to Britain's success in the jobs of the future is a skills deficit, particularly amongst the low income and the low paid.

So today I think we should be thinking of a new deal between employers and government to deliver the changes we want to see. The government putting new duties and requirements on individuals, but they must get the skills that they need as well as look for jobs. You helping us match benefit claimants with the jobs that you have on offer. The government offering a credit of at least £3,000 to help cover the costs of an apprentice, you offering more apprenticeship opportunities in your business wherever possible.

The government giving you a far bigger role in directing the skills budgets and the chance to develop your own accredited qualifications, you continuing to expand your workplace training. And that's why we are investing £1 billion over the next three years in 'Train to Gain', the national skills service, providing advice and skills brokering to employers. Where that funding goes will now be decided by you, financing courses you say as employers are valuable.

So these are the proposals today – a new partnership between government and employers. And I believe this is the way, indeed the only way we can prosper and succeed in the modern world. It's the only way individuals will be able to fulfil their potential but its also the only way we can successfully meet and master the challenge of globalisation and that will be to the benefit of us all. Thank you very much.

Quotes:

I really enjoyed today, getting more information about apprenticeships definitely helped. I'm now working with unemployed people helping them gain employment and future education, so all of the new initiatives that are coming up would really benefit me and my business.

Jon Snow:

It's now my great pleasure to move back into the private sector to an organisation that's already been mentioned by the Prime Minister as being a lead in apprenticeships. I'm really delighted to welcome Sir Michael Rake Chairman of BT. Sir Mike Rake.

Sir Michael Rake (Chairman of BT):

Jon, thank you very much and good morning everybody. BT itself is a global communications services company we turnover about 20 billion a year, employing around 106,000 people in 170 countries, with more than 18 million

customers. The talent we need can and does come from every corner of the world. Today's economy needs higher skills than a generation ago and it's changing rapidly every day. The wider and wider use of technology across all industries and the ease of moving work across borders mean there will be fewer and fewer low value added, low skilled jobs. If, as the Prime Minister says, the UK has a chance and hopes to remain a centre for high value added business activity, we need a workforce with better skills than are available elsewhere. And I am personally delighted to work with the Government, with the Prime Minister, with all of the departments represented today, the task force and educational experts, to make sure we have a seamless journey towards talent for this country. Thank you very much.

Audience question:

There are 500,000 women in the UK who want to work but are not working and they sight their caring responsibilities as the main reason for that. So they say their barrier to work is not necessarily around skills but around the lack of local part-time flexible work. I'd like to ask the panel and the government how they plan to address the needs of these women and unlock this talent pool.

Hazel Blears (Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government):

If we had more support for women starting their own businesses as well as going into traditional kinds of work that would give us a lot more flexibility and the figures between this country and America in terms of women start ups is absolutely shocking. If we could do something about that then I think we'd make really big progress. And I just want to say a general thing that's come out to me from a lot of the contributions this morning. Is about the number of organisations, acronyms, places that you need to go to and I think sometimes it's a maize for people trying to find their way through the system. And what I would say to you is that our all of our Local Authorities right across the country, they are going to be taking a much bigger role on this agenda. We're making it an absolute priority.

Frances O'Grady (Deputy General Secretary, TUC):

I think this agenda has to be about not just improving skills, but improving jobs, improving our workplaces. You've got people going into jobs that maybe aren't paying enough, or aren't flexible enough, or aren't skilling them up enough to be sustainable jobs.

Quotes:

What we're looking to do is set up a training school, which we'd like to call School of Fish. It's going to be community based. We are very passionate about everything that's been said today. We're working with QCA to offer training that is sector specific to get kids off benefits, off the dole, lone parents back into school, everything that's been said today – we tick all the boxes but we need somebody to help to move this to the next level.

John Denham (Secretary of State, Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills):

I think when Gordon spoke this morning about the nature of the challenges we face in competing in the modern world, he probably expressed common ground that it's on the level of our skills and hope we develop the talented people in this country that our future success is going to hang.

We have made very good progress; we have to do even better over the next 10 years or so. We cannot do this as government; we don't expect you to do it without government. But working together in the ways we discussed this morning, I am sure we can secure the prosperous and competitive future for this country that we need. Thank you.