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## Labour Party conference 2009: Harriet Harman speech

Speech to The Labour Party Annual Conference 2009 by Harriet Harman MP Minister for Women

Since last Conference, we have had twelve months of determined progress towards equality. It's been a year of promises made and promises kept.

Twelve months ago, I pledged to you that we would press forward on our progressive agenda to help make Britain a fairer and more equal place and conference that is exactly what we have done.

For us, for Labour, equality is not just a slogan - it's what we are about. It's a way of life. It's about our values and how we do our politics.

Equality matters to us because its about people's lives.

Its about the right of a disabled person to work on equal terms

Its about the right of a woman who works part-time not to be excluded from the pension scheme

Its about the right not being written off as too old

Equality matters to us

Because it's a fundamental human right to be treated fairly

And equality matters to us because it's the only way you can have a united and peaceful society in which everyone feels included.

And because it's also the basis of a strong economy which draws on the talents of all.

The economies that will flourish in the future are not those which are blinkered by prejudice or stultified by the old boys network - but those which draw on the talents and abilities of all.

Equality and fairness are the very hallmarks of a modern and confident society looking to the future in which everyone is able to play their part.

And conference this Labour Government has made clear that our quest for fairness and equality is not just for the good times. Even through the massive economic challenge of the last twelve months we have not put equality on the back burner. Because, as Labour, we know that it's precisely when times are hard, that it's even more important that everyone is treated fairly and that everyone pulls together.

And so the whole labour team fights for equality - under Gordon's leadership.

And Gordon Brown, as Prime Minister, has indeed taken a proud lead. Last year, for the first time ever, a British prime minister hosted a reception in 10 Downing Street to mark LGBT history month. We celebrate past progress like civil partnerships - happy anniversary Angela Eagle and Maria Exell - but we resolve to step up action to tackle the problems that still persist - like homophobic bullying in schools.

But advancing progressive causes is a struggle for change. The truth is that it doesn't happen because of any one individual. Progress is advanced, barriers are broken, changes

are made because we are a movement of people who share the same values and because we refuse to give up the fight for what is right.

And we won't take no for an answer Labour's team is an army of equality champions - working with my committed team of equality ministers - Vera Baird, Maria Eagle and Mike Foster - demanding change

Last year's conference demanded a strong Equality Bill. And through the National Policy Forum we've done just that. We've shaped a Bill which strengthens the law to tackle race discrimination toughens the duties of all public authorities to ensure that disabled people can live independently and work in just the same way as people without disabilities and which bans the last legally permitted- discrimination - age discrimination - and about time too.

BAME Labour insisted that we do more to increase the number of our outstanding black and asian MPs - so we have.

In the Equality Bill we will change the law so that parties can do more to increase the selection of black and asian candidates.

Trade unionists have demanded action on pay discrimination against women. Women at work are paid 22% less than men. A 22% pay gap in the 21st Century. That is just not acceptable in this day and age. But women who work in financial services are paid 44% less than their male colleagues. So we will make every big employer publish how much on average they pay their women per hour and how much they pay their men. I know this is controversial - especially in the private sector. But, you can't tackle pay discrimination if it's hidden. Good employers have nothing to fear - but bad employers must have nowhere to hide.

Labour Women MPs and Labour women throughout the party have demanded more help for families. So, we doubled maternity pay and extended it from 6 to 9 months. And the Prime Minister, earlier this month, announced that now we will give families more choice by letting the mother choose to either take the pay and leave herself or, when the baby is 6 months old, let the father take the remaining pay and leave.

And we remain committed to our goal of achieving a year's paid leave by the end of this parliament. And, this year, as well, we've given more parents rights to flexible work.

Now its not just parents with children under 6 who can request flexible work but all parents with children up to 16.

But we are committed to doing more taking up new battles, recognising the big changes that lie ahead- in our economy, in our family life and for the next generation.

Families are not just parents and children. More and more families simply could not cope without grandparents helping out with the kids.

And more and more family life is not just about looking after children and going out to work but caring for elderly relatives too. In the next 20 years the number of people over 85 is set to double - so just as we've backed up families with children, we will back up families caring for older relatives too.

The lives of women today - and their hopes and ambitions are different from our mothers'. And that is the case whether you are a girl school leaver in Scotland, or a young mother in Wales, whether you are one of the thousands of wives of our armed forces.

The wives of our servicemen have always held things together at home. And their task has become even more demanding with the men away fighting the Taliban and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan.

Just like every other woman, service wives want to, and need to, get training, get work, find childcare. But that's hard if your family has to move regularly and if you are on a base miles away from your parents and in-laws. That's why Bob Ainsworth, the Secretary of State for Defence, and I are working with ministers across government to make sure that as well as doing all we can to support our armed forces, We are helping our armed forces wives' so they don't lose out on new opportunities to get on in their work. Our navy, airforce and soldiers make a great sacrifice for our country and we back them up. Their wives, too, make an enormous personal sacrifice for this country and we will back them up too.

And we are stepping up our action to protect women from violence and sexual exploitation.

At long last we've ditched the antiquated law which allows a man to get away with murdering his wife by claiming that it was her fault because she provoked him.

On rape, though 50% more men are convicted of rape than they were in 1997 - because we've toughened the law, got a special squad of rape prosecutors and use the DNA data base - despite that progress we know that there are still major problems in how the justice system deals with rape.

We have got to work out where the cracks in the system are and take further action. Rapists must be caught after their first attack - if they aren't they just carry on and more women suffer. And that's why we've set up a review under Vivien Stern. We've made progress. But not enough. We're determined to make more.

And on prostitution. We know that prostitution is not work - it's exploitation of women by men - often women who have mental health problems or drug or alcohol addiction. So we're introducing a new criminal offence of having sex with a prostitute who's being controlled by a pimp.

We're stepping up our action to tackle human trafficking. We're determined to ensure that, especially in the run up to the Olympics, international criminal gangs don't trick and abduct women from abroad and sell them for sex in London.

And there is a very sinister development which we are determined to stop. You know trip advisor - a website where guests put their comments on line for others to see. There is now a website, like that, where pimps put women on sale for sex and then men who've had sex with them put their comments on line. It is 'Punternet' and fuels the demand for prostitutes. It is truly degrading and puts women at risk.

Punternet has pages and pages of women for sale in London. But Punternet is based in California so I've raised it with the US Ambassador to London and I've called on California's governor Arnie Schwarzenegger to close it down. Surely it can't be too difficult for the Terminator to terminate Punternet and that's what I am demanding that he does.

A further challenge that we have to tackle in the months ahead is, that seeping in to many communities, is the racism and division of the BNP.

The BNP pretend they've changed, pretend they're respectable. They are no such thing.

They're still the same party that wanted the Nazis to win the war.

They're still the same party whose constitution excludes from membership anyone who is not "indigenous Caucasian."

It's right that the new Equality Bill will ban that clause. There can be no place in our democracy for an apartheid party.

Our active and campaigning parties have proved that the way to tackle the BNP is to be on the doorstep.

Showing that we are taking action for those who fear for their jobs or their homes  
And showing that we are on their side

Our government is - under Secretary of State, John Denham - taking forward co-ordinated government action to address disadvantage and alienation.

Our active and campaigning parties are working with black and Asian communities to challenge the BNP.

Tackling the hate of the BNP and showing that we are on their side.

We are fighting back against the BNP.

Conference the poison of the BNP has no place in our communities - not now; not ever.

We all know that unfairness, prejudice and discrimination is not just because you are a woman, or because of your race, or disability or sexuality.

Overhanging all these different strands of inequality is the inequality rooted in the family you were born into and the place you were born. Your class, your region.

Every one of us knows that although we've made progress tackling the massive divide that the Tories drove into society, there is still injustice and unfairness.

So clause one of our new Equality Bill will bring in a legal duty on all public bodies to narrow the gap between rich and poor. It will be a law that binds all government ministers, and all government departments as well as local government.

By the age of six, the bright child from a poor home is overtaken in school by the less- able child from an affluent home.

In this day and age - who really feels that is acceptable? We certainly don't. But I'll tell you who does - the Tories.

The Tories were pretending to be progressive - to pretend they care about inequality. But they've ditched that. They are back to their true nature.

They opposed LGBT rights.

They opposed tax credits and plan to cut childcare

They oppose the new Equality Bill.

We want change - they would turn the clock back

We've built up support for families - don't let the Tories wreck it.

The progress we have made towards equality - don't let the Tories wreck it.

Every gain has to be fought for, defended and built on  
This is our fightback conference.

The whole Labour team is the fightback team.

We know what we must do.

We will fight for fairness, fight for equality and - most importantly - we will fight to win.

