***Welfare Reform Debate - 17th November***

My Lords, I welcome the Government’s manifesto commitment to halve the disability employment gap. I sincerely hope that the Bill will help to achieve that, but there are challenges along the way.

Scope’s analysis of the labour force survey indicates that between July and September 2011, 18.5% of the total number of unemployed people were disabled. The statistics from April to June 2015 indicate that disabled people now make up 26% of the total number of unemployed people. It is also estimated that a 10 percentage point increase in disability employment would increase GDP by £45 billion by 2030.

I believe that disabled people should be in work, but it is a complex issue. The Government have consistently said that they support the most vulnerable but it is no surprise that I have concerns about how we might achieve that. The importance of the annual report has been highlighted by the noble Baroness, Lady Doocey, and she is absolutely right, but it is more likely that a disabled person will be asked at interview how they go to the bathroom than whether they have the skills to do the job. In other contexts, I have frequently been asked that question. A non-disabled person would be utterly appalled if they were asked that in an interview, but disabled people wrongly expect this as the norm.

I hope that in Committee we will be able to explore what good reporting will look like and how value can be added. That is important because, once out of work, disabled people face considerable barriers to returning. Some 10% of unemployed disabled people have been out of work for five years or more, compared with just 3% of the non-disabled population. I live in the north-east of England, where in the past eight weeks 5,000 jobs have been lost. The chances of a disabled person finding work in this environment will be few and far between. In recommissioning for the work programme and Work Choice in 2017, the Government must develop detailed plans for specialist employment support programmes for disabled people, as recommended by the Commons Work and Pensions Select Committee last month.

The current back-to-work support for disabled people is ineffective. The work programme may have been successful in helping to address cyclical unemployment but it has struggled to address the historically low employment rates among disabled people. Job outcomes for disabled people on the work programme are only 7.7% for new ESA customers and 3.9% for other ESA incapacity benefit customers. This is compared to a job outcome rate of 21.5% for JSA 25-plus customers. People referred to Work Choice between July and December 2014 had a job-start rate of 57.3% by June 2015, but Work Choice is small in scale and poorly targeted at disabled people on ESA.

I hope that the Minister will consult experts on what support into employment should look like, because the work capability assessment does not assess employment support needs. The level of financial support that a disabled person receives determines the employment support that they receive, but that is unhelpful because those two things are just not related.

I must apologise to the Minister that I am unable to attend the weekly Cross-Bench meeting tomorrow, where he will be speaking to my noble friends about this Bill, because I am launching a Citizens Advice report called *Waiting for Credit*, which looks at the universal credit rollout. It is vital that we get the correct implementation of this because it affects how disabled and non-disabled people are able to move in and out of work.

The noble Lord, Lord Low, has already mentioned that he, my noble friend Lady Meacher and I will be looking at ESA. I do not wish to pre-empt the findings but I imagine that there may be quite a number of amendments in this area. There is a great deal of concern. I do not want disabled people to be disincentivised from getting into work, and we need to explore further whether it creates a greater incentive for claimants to want to be placed in the support group. Given the limited support available to disabled people in the support group, it could have the negative impact of moving people further away from the workplace.

I would welcome a further discussion with the Minister about the impact assessment. I struggle to see how cutting support could incentivise disabled people into work, and I am looking forward to the DWP’s convincing arguments in this area.

There are also a number of issues to do with carers, who could be penalised by the lower benefit cap in the Bill. They make a huge contribution to society, but there is great complexity about whether they live in the same property and whether they are counted as a separate household, even if they do. We must consider how protection can be offered to carers who do not live in the same household. There are also many considerations for people with a life-limiting and potentially rapidly declining condition.

The noble Lord, Lord Borwick, raised the issue of Motability. I had a Motability car when I started learning to drive at 17, because insurance for a disabled person was ludicrous, twice the price of that for a new driver, which was blatant discrimination. It is better now, but under the changes that are coming, if a person loses their benefits they will lose their car. There was a recent case of Olivia Cork, a leg amputee, who was told she was not disabled enough. She went through the process and asked for reconsideration but was turned down. She now has to find £4,900 to be able to keep her car. In a Britain where there are many issues of accessibility to public transport, this is far more disabling than it is helping a disabled person get into work. Whizz-Kidz launched a campaign today looking at accessible travel. In London it is fine, but if you live in the north-east like I do it is really difficult for a disabled person to get around.

There is so much that can be done to help disabled people, but so much is outside the Minister’s remit. I dream that one day we will actually have a joined-up Government. I am chair of ukactive, and last week we released *Blueprint for an Active Britain*; it contains a whole host of recommendations, such as having activity experts in GPs’ surgeries to help everybody become more active. The Minister said that work is beneficial—activity is beneficial too. We need to be looking at physical literacy for all. Many disabled children are excluded from physical activity and PE in school and there are clear links between educational attainment and activity, but that is outside the remit of the Bill.

I am also chair of the national Wheelchair Leadership Alliance; it is looking at provision of day chairs, which in England is a complete postcode lottery. I am grateful that we have had a lot of support from MPs and CCGs but the wrong wheelchair causes harm. It excludes children from school and people from work. To highlight the issue, I had a picture of myself taken in a wheelbarrow. It has a seat, wheels and handles but is absolutely no use to me. That is the problem of providing a wrong wheelchair. Access to Work has been through reforms. I am currently dealing with a case—it provided a woman with a chair but only gave her five-sevenths of the money towards it. It then suggested that she leave it in work over the weekend so she would not wear it out. These changes are simply bonkers. Instead of encouraging people to work, they are making it really difficult.

Finally, I was today considering why we are here and what we are trying to achieve. I saw a story in the *Bristol Post* this morning about a young lady called Lily Grace Hooper, who is at primary school. She had a stroke as a baby and is now blind. After a health and safety assessment, she was told that she cannot use her white cane in school in case she tripped people up, but she should have a full-time adult helper instead. What a waste of resources. I am sure there are decent intentions behind it, but it is patronising, it does not promote socialisation, it does not aid her education and it takes away any aspiration. This case sends out a really poor message to disabled people about their independence. The message is, “Why bother?”. I know that this decision was not made by the DWP or the Minister, but the message it sends out about the value of disabled people in society is very worrying. If the Government want disabled people in work, we need to look at the wider issues, not just treat them in isolation. If children are important—if we genuinely want to look at their life chances—children like Lily Grace Hooper deserve a much brighter future.