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**WORK-LIFE BALANCE: A NEW ROUTE TO SOCIAL JUSTICE
SPEECH TO DEMOS, LONDON, WEDNESDAY 7TH APRIL 2004**

Time, one senior trade unionist said recently, has become the new money. Hardly a day goes by without media reports of some new aspect of the tension between work and home. For working parents this is often the issue in their lives. They are at the sharp end of a truly modern dilemma.

Work-life balance is a huge issue. One that confronts millions of people. And yet it is one that politics rarely speaks to. I believe it is time to raise it up the political agenda. I do so with some trepidation. It is an issue that is complex and, as I will argue, not susceptible to any easy fix. Nor am I any great fan of the State being involved in family life. Nonetheless I believe it would make a big difference if government could do more to help working parents balance work and home. Today I want to suggest some practical ways that could happen.

My own experience has made me realise how much it matters. When I gave up my job nine months ago as health secretary I did so because I had come to realise one simple thing: I couldn't have everything. Reconciling a demanding 24 hour a day career with anything remotely resembling a normal family life had become, for me at least, impossible.

In those days the time I had at home was more snatched than quality time. In the end something had to give. Mine was a very personal choice to be around more to see my kids grow up. It was - and is - undoubtedly the right one for me and my family. Life feels a million times better.

If my post bag is anything to go by, the choice I made – to put family ahead of career – seemed to strike a chord. I think the reason is simple enough. The dilemmas I had to play out in the glare of TV lights face millions of people week in week out in the privacy of their own homes.

My personal experience and the public response to it has convinced me that quality of life – and crucially the issue of how families with dependents can be helped to make the choice that is right for them between work and home – should be part of a new politics. This politics is about spreading - redistributing - opportunities in society so that more people can realise their own aspirations in their lives. It is based on the notion of active citizenship and shared responsibility where the job of

government is not to pretend it can do everything but instead focuses on enabling more people to make choices for themselves and their families.

I want to argue today that helping families with dependents, especially working parents, make choices over time should be central to any third term New Labour agenda. I believe help here is a new route to social justice, not least because the less wealthy people are the more tough are the choices they have to face.

Last autumn a survey reported over half of working women felt like quitting work immediately because they felt under such pressure. Two-thirds of full timers said their job was damaging their family life. One-third that it caused their child unhappiness. Recent DTI research shows three in ten employees feel they are spending too much time at work. I guess this is a common enough feeling. Most of us would like to work less and leisure more.

In this regard work-life balance is a pretty meaningless term. It tends to mean all things to all people. The young single professional might lament the fact that he or she doesn't have enough time to experience the growing world of possibilities they read about in the Sunday supplements. But it is hardly a crisis. When I talk of work-life balance what I am thinking of is the increasingly difficult trade offs between work and home, money and time that families have to make when they have children or dependents. Over one third of respondents in that DTI survey had changed their working hours to fit in with their outside commitments – the so-called downsizing phenomenon.

Work-life balance has become an issue as a consequence of profound economic and social changes. Over recent decades extended families and communities have weakened. Families have ceased to comprise male breadwinners and female homemakers. In the last six years alone over one million women have joined the workforce. In 7 out of 10 couples both partners now work. Over two-thirds of working women with children under 5 years old now work part time. And because women still do the lion's share of caring responsibilities - for older relatives as well as younger children - it is their careers which tend to lag so intensifying the pressures they feel under.

While more mums are combining paid employment with domestic duties, more dads are becoming present not absent at home. The number of men working part time – though still small – has doubled in just a decade. And whereas in the 1970s fathers with under-fives devoted less than 15

minutes a day to child-related activity, one study estimates modern dads take on one-third of all total parental childcare. Whether that is true or not, our idea of what it means to be a good father is undergoing a revolution. As Neil Bach showed it's no longer considered unmanly even for a tough guy to be a doting dad. In the US young men in their twenties are now more likely to give up pay to spend time with their families than young women. More men want to play an active role in child-rearing and are often frustrated by being unable to do so.

So if the trend is towards more women working and more men sharing what is all the fuss about? The answer is that modern life has brought new stresses. Time is the new pressure. More family time is now spent working but there is less direct support through extended family networks. People have more money but there is more to do with it. And people want more. More leisure. More rewarding careers. More time with the kids. Sadly there are only so many hours in the day. The squeeze becomes harder the lower down families are on the income scale.

Of course no-one can decide for families what their priorities should be. These are personal decisions. The question is whether government has a role. The answer in my view is that it has – in enabling families to make the choice that is right for them. The scope people have to make choices depends in part on what society - through politics and other means - makes available. And there are some things government can do and others it cannot. The new politics of opportunity I advocate requires Government to recognise its own limits. So whereas it can address some of the factors that contribute to work-life imbalance, it is not best placed to address them all. Issues of masculinity and men's role in society are not readily amenable to a political solution. But politics might have a role in altering some aspects of the cultural landscape, such as helping get more women to the top of organisations. It could certainly do more to change the prevailing workplace ethos from one that prizes stamina and long hours most to one which rewards performance and flexibility more. And it has an obvious role in helping remove the income and childcare barriers that stand in the way of many families being able to get work and home commitments balanced.

In recent years Labour has made a good start in tackling these modern-day lifestyle deficits. Almost 4 million workers with disabled children or kids under six have been given new rights to request to work flexibly. Extended and more generous maternity and paternity leave together with new tax credits have brought some £13 billion to almost 6 million families. An extra 1.6 million children have access to childcare places.

Surestart is now in many poorer areas and many low income families are benefiting from financial help to pay for childcare.

So good progress is being made. The issue now is how we can build on the foundations that have been laid. Helping families cope needs to be an issue not just for part of Government but for the whole of it. For this reason I hope the Government will consider publishing a cross-departmental White Paper outlining a ten to fifteen year strategy for helping more families balance work and home.

Labour's drive cannot just be for better work opportunities. It has also to be to open up better life opportunities. An overly obsessive focus on the one risks ignoring the other. This is in no way to argue against welfare to work. Nor is it to advocate a return to a benefits-dependency culture where taxpayers pick up the tab for those not making the effort to work or find work. Instead it recognises that people want to have a choice in their lives. But with too little practical help still available more people are being forced to make a stark choice between work and home rather than being able to choose a better balance between both.

For fairness sake, the opportunity to choose cannot just be the preserve of those who can afford to work less. Choice is currently only for those with the cash. That is unfair and in my view must be changed. A Labour government should not ignore choice. It should redistribute it.

The people who struggle most with how to balance work and family are often the poorest. Families where mums are cleaners and dads are security guards have to take on multiple jobs and work shifts to manage finances and childcare. Downsizing is not an option for them. Together the triple problems they face - and that so many of Britain's low and middle income families share - of long hours, the gender pay gap and inflexible childcare mean that work-life balance is more than something that can be dismissed as an issue for the chattering classes. It is a modern-day problem requiring a modern-day solution. I now want to outline some practical policy possibilities for where government action could be most effective.

First, then the problem of long hours. Although the proportion of people working over 48 hours a week has fallen slightly in recent years, the average length of the working week is growing. Plant and machine operatives work longest, followed by managers and professionals. Tellingly, while men are now working fewer hours, women are working more.

I do not favour regulatory restrictions on long hours, not least because of the potential damage to competitiveness and productivity. In any case many people positively choose to work longer hours. The better answer lies in greater flexibility in the hours people work so they can better combine their family and employment responsibilities.

Here the Government to date has preferred exhortation to regulation. The results so far, though promising, are not without their problems. On Monday Patricia Hewitt published new figures showing nearly one million parents - one in four - have asked for a change in their working hours. 80% have been granted. Previous surveys show most requests were to work part time, from women following maternity leave. Fathers are still far less likely than mothers to have a flexible work arrangement or to request one. Provision of flexible working – such as annualised hours, term-time working or work from home - other than the part time option was not widely available. Neither was the provision of childcare.

Up to one-fifth of women do not return to work after having a baby simply because they cannot find a job with suitable hours. Maternity Alliance also point to many mothers who do return losing out through pay cuts or lower status jobs, in part because there are few effective penalties against employers who behave in this way. It tends to be women in higher grade occupations, those working in the more heavily unionised public sector and those whose employers already help with work life balance who are most likely to return.

Flexibility should not be a lottery. It should be part and parcel of modern-day employment. Employers benefit, employees benefit and so do their children. A new culture is needed in the workplace where a continuum of flexible work options is available. Our employment practices, with their emphasis on long hours rather than flexibility, owe too much to yesterday's economy, not today's. In today's world the key to organisational success is flexibility. The employment choice cannot purely be between part time and full time work. Other options need to be made more widely available. Achieving this culture change will require more resources and effort from Government to help employers, small firms especially, introduce flexible working practices, perhaps on a sector by sector basis. A code of practice to help employers assess requests to work flexibly could be introduced. A new award, akin to Investors in People, could go to employers with the best family-friendly policies. More active co-operation from both employer organisations and trades unions will also be required, for example to encourage employees

themselves to devise ways of pooling shifts or improving childcare. To date the priority they have both given the issue has been far too low.

Providing greater priority is forthcoming in future we should be able to avoid further legislation to make flexibility a right not just a request. Light touch is better than a heavy hand. But it sends all the wrong messages to cap compensation at too low a level for employees who win tribunal cases against employers denying reasonable requests to work flexibly. The cap should be reviewed as part of the wider review, due in 2006, of the current legislation on flexibility. I believe that review also provides the opportunity to extend the rights to request flexible working that parents with young children currently enjoy to those with older children and elderly dependents. Perhaps, in time all employees should be entitled to make such requests of their employers.

Secondly, further action is needed to tackle low pay and close the gender pay. Many work long hours simply so there is enough money to make ends meet. This Labour Government's efforts to tackle poverty pay have, of course, helped millions of people over recent years and since the Equal Pay Act was passed by a previous Labour Government the gender pay gap has narrowed. Nonetheless full time women still earn 18% less than men. Part time women 40% less. Further rises in the minimum wage will help here. And the Government is already considering how to ensure equal pay for work of equal value cases can be made cheaper and easier. But there is one further step it could take.

Recent EOC research shows most employers have no plans to check whether they are paying women fairly by conducting an equal pay review (EPRs). In keeping with the Government's preference for exhortation not regulation, at present EPRs are a voluntary matter for employers. Again I favour this light touch approach. But I believe it must be backed up by a clear signal from Government that it will take further legislative action unless more employers actively review their current pay structures. I hope the Government will consider making resources available, perhaps in conjunction with organisations like the CBI, to help more employers to do so. If sufficient progress is not forthcoming the Government should introduce a new right so that workers would be able by law to request an equal pay review from their employers. This new right would parallel the existing legal right to request flexible working. The principal beneficiaries would be women, many of them low paid.

Thirdly, more help should be given to new parents. The Government has already extended parental leave and, for the first time, introduced

paid paternity leave. But whereas the UK offers relatively generous parental leave entitlements for new mums it provides a low level of payments. Only Greece and Luxembourg provide less. Take up is poor. What is more in the UK parental leave is still predominantly geared to mothers. It is time to learn lessons from other European countries. In the Scandinavian countries take up of parental leave is much higher because it is paid at a higher rate and is available to both mums and dads. Indeed because part of the family entitlement is reserved for dads take up rates for fathers hits 80% in Norway.

I do not advocate that approach because for me it smacks too much of the State interfering in parenting responsibilities. But I do think we should review the current entitlements to parental leave with a view to extending paid paternity leave beyond the current two weeks. And there is a strong case for allowing families to choose which parent should be able to claim parental leave and pay for the twelve months after the birth of their child. That way families can decide how burdens are best shared and fathers, as well as mothers, will get the chance to spend more time parenting.

That brings me to the crucial issue of how we can build on the Government's success to date in improving and extending childcare. Since Labour came to office we have greatly expanded childcare. Investment now pays dividends later, in improved life chances for children, especially the poorest. Shortages of places, however, remain in some areas, particularly for parents with shift work patterns. Currently children aged 3 to 4 are entitled to about 2 and a half hours a day in nursery. In Denmark and Sweden the norm is about 8 hours per day. So flexibility is one big issue. Affordability is the other. The Daycare Trust estimate the typical cost of a nursery place for a child under two is over £6,500 a year. In London it is nearer £9,000. People with no or low incomes can never afford the market rate. Instead many families rely on the informal networks of relatives or friends to juggle their childcare.

It is enormously welcome that the Government is committed to further investment including in Surestart and community childcare centres. This expansion provides the opportunity to move beyond the current targeted approach to childcare to make help more universally available. My proposed White Paper should outline a fifteen year strategy for expanding childcare so that Britain can match the levels of provision available in the Scandinavian countries. That way the childcare sector – public, private and voluntary – can plan for expansion and particularly for recruitment and training of staff. Places would be free for those on low incomes. For

better-off parents - over and above the current 2.5 hours a day free childcare - a sliding scale of charges would depend on levels of income.

Provision also needs to change. More childcare centres, nursery places, Surestart projects and out-of-school activities are part of the answer but they cannot be the sole solution. A one size fits all approach will not work for parents whose patterns of work demand flexibility over how childcare is provided. This is not a Potsdam 1958 world. State support must not be limited to institutionally-based childcare. It needs to be extended to home-based childcare, as I believe the Government now recognises. Carers, nannies, child-minders, sitting services – just as much as school nurseries and Surestart centres - are part of a modern childcare infrastructure. There should be a level playing field when it comes to State support. Provided the childcare service that parents chose is registered as being safe they should qualify for State help according to their levels of income.

So when it comes to work-life balance I believe there are practical steps the Government can take to help working families – fostering flexibility at work, tackling unfairness in pay and improving help for parents. But government cannot do it alone. Employers should be doing far more if for no other reason than the potential pay-back in improved productivity and morale they would get. And the trade union movement, needing to reassert its modern-day relevance, should move the whole issue of work-life balance to the top of its negotiating agenda.

Getting a better balance between work and home will take more than good negotiation or government action, of course. There are deep-seated cultural changes that are needed too. Inevitably they take time but the changes I am proposing seek to lay the right foundations for them. One thing is certain. The issue of work-life balance will not go away. It is here to stay. Indeed as the pace of modern life intensifies and as full employment beckons it will assume growing significance.

In the end life is a series of trade-offs and people have to make their own choices. I was fortunate when I made mine. It was the right choice and one that I have not regretted for a single day. But the truth is I could afford to choose to do less work in order to buy more time. It is not so easy if you are a porter in a hospital or a secretary in an office. The job of progressive governments today is to help more people so they are able to choose. Spreading opportunities must be at the core of today's political agenda for Britain.