

27<sup>th</sup>. July 2004

Dear Mr.Blair,

Benefit discrimination against physically disabled people.

I am writing to you in the hope you will be able to bring about a change in the law which precludes some physically disabled people from working.

You may be aware that the benefits system actively discourages physically disabled people who live in residential homes from seeking paid employment – specifically if they are in receipt of income support. Any earned income over £20 per week is removed from that person's benefit. The result is that a person may have to earn over £900 per week in order to actually receive more than £20.

My 26-years-old son Doug is just such a person. He went to Leeds University to follow a Geophysics course which should have included a year's studying in the USA. Instead of obtaining (he hoped) a good degree, he gradually became disabled to the extent that he now has no choice but to live in a residential home where he can be hoisted into and out of his wheelchair, bed, etc. There is little likelihood of an improvement in Doug's condition.

However, Doug has not given up. Your colleague, Colin Burgon, M.P., will know that Doug has campaigned for improved facilities for the disabled in Wetherby (where Doug lives) – for example, all the banks are now accessible by wheelchair! He is following an Open University course covering mainly Geology and Information Technology, including designing websites which are accessible to people with all types of disability.. Amongst other interests, Doug voluntarily assists with the teaching of IT in a primary school.

You will therefore understand how excited Doug was to receive several phone calls from a firm (UK Ability) which specialises in making websites accessible to disabled people (including those with hearing and visual difficulties). The owner had heard of Doug's abilities and wants Doug to work for them. Not only would Doug receive payment, but he would be using two of his main interests for the benefit of other disadvantaged people. You will remember that you have met UK Ability's founders

"I am delighted to offer my support to the project of developing the UK Ability websites and the Ability Magazine.

"As a Government, as an individual, we are committed to try to make sure disabled people get the fullest possible opportunities in life, and there are so many barriers which need to be broken down, so many obstacles which stand in the way of that.

"And the whole purpose of the UK Ability Websites and Ability Magazine project is to use the new medium of communication, the Internet, to give disabled people the chance to lead the fullest possible life, to develop their potential to do all sorts of things that people take for granted, but for them needs that little bit extra.

"And the great thing about the UK Ability Websites and Ability Magazine is that they are locally driven.

"It's disabled people, their families, their friends, the local charities and organisations that are coming together to make it work.

"So I hope that anyone who can be involved, gets involved.

"It's going to make a big difference to people's lives, it's a very worthwhile project.

"And I am personally delighted to be associated with it."

Please note the highlighted sentence, which unfortunately is not the case for my son. Doug asked his solicitor to find a legal way of his being paid without losing his disability benefits. The solicitor has just replied that there is no way of Doug receiving payment without being guilty of benefit fraud. You can imagine Doug's, and our, disappointment and feelings of frustration.

There seems to be no logic behind this ruling. This would not be the situation if Doug had been suitably employed before he entered University (although he did do a gap year with the Environment Agency), nor if he were cared for by my wife and me instead of being in a residential home.

I am sure you will appreciate just how distressing and demotivating this is for Doug. People need to feel that they are making a contribution to society. He wants to be financially independent of my wife and me; currently he is dependent on our giving him gifts of clothes, even to the extent of our giving him the gloves he needs to enable him to propel his wheelchair.

The situation also deprives society of Doug's skills. I understand that it will be a legal requirement for websites to be made fully accessible – yet the law precludes one of the people who have the requisite knowledge for doing this.

The situation also costs the country money. Doug believes it would be reasonable for him to pay for his keep in the Leonard Cheshire home, although he – and we – believe that he should not have to pay for his nursing care. If Doug were able to pay for his keep, there would be less of a drain on Leeds City Social Services' budget. In addition, Doug would pay tax on his earnings, thus making a contribution to the costs of National Government.

In addition to the arguments outlined above, it is clear that Doug is being discriminated against as a result of his physical disability. If he were discriminated against by a company he could take the company to court or to an employment tribunal. He cannot do this when the discrimination is caused by the law!

Please would you do all in your power to make it possible for people such as Doug to earn money without losing all their disability benefit? I believe that Doug would have to earn in excess of £50,000 p.a. if he were to benefit financially from paid employment. My wife and I are writing to as many people as possible (including the Press) in an effort to get the law changed.

Yours sincerely,

Stuart Paulley