

Advancing Enterprise 2005

4 February 2005

Speech by Brendan Barber, General Secretary, Trades Union Congress at Advancing Enterprise 2005.

Advancing enterprise: people and skills.

Ruth, thanks very much indeed for the opportunity to contribute to this important debate on skills. This is the session in which you're going to be tested, whether you know your LSE's from your SSC's, your RDA's from your SSDA, and I have to confess, I may throw in a few T and G's, GMB's and AUT's. And at the end of the session, Ruth's going to test you all and if you pass, you get an NVQ level 4. This is I think a session in which we're going to see that there's a really very, very strong consensus that we need a genuine revolution in workplace learning and skills if we are to raise our productivity and compete successfully over the longer term. And I want to see the trade union movement right at the heart of that drive to raise skills.

I think it's no exaggeration to say that I see our work on learning as one of the most exciting developments in trade unionism really in a generation, and it's a tremendously powerful example of the positive contribution the trade unions can make. In the last few years, we've seen countless union initiatives in this field. They've led to the establishment of over 120 workplace learning centres, hundreds of new learning agreements signed with employers in every part of the economy. Around 100,000 of our members a year now are benefiting from learning as a direct result of union-led initiatives and projects, and these have been driven by the network now of 8,000 union workplace learning representatives. Their job is to negotiate with their employer to boost training investment, to broker the provision of new opportunities with local colleges and other providers, and crucially to act as adviser and mentor to fellow workers, giving them the confidence to take the first steps back into learning.

Our learning reps are reaching parts of the workforce that others simply haven't been able to reach: older workers, members of ethnic minorities, women with caring responsibilities, an awful lot of people who'd given up on learning, and who felt that learning had given up on them. But we've been able to get them back into learning and to encourage progression as well from basic to intermediate skills, and increasingly to professional high-level skills too. Now, our aim is to triple the capacity of our effort by the end of this decade, and we've seen excellent initiatives, as I said, in every part of the economy, like a new learning project I visited just a couple of weeks ago in the Britannia Building Society, where one in ten of the workforce has now benefited from IT, business management and basic skills courses since last April. When the project was launched, the applications to get involved and take part were double the numbers that had originally been expected. Like the Lifelong Learning at Siemens' gas turbines, the TUC's learning project of the year in 2004. Like the project I visited a little while ago in Newcastle Local Authority Building Services Department, where the initiative had not only boosted productivity but had also really transformed the industrial relations atmosphere, because the

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unions and the management had a positive joint project to work on together, and that provided an enormously different context then for handling the day-to-day workplace problems and niggles that otherwise dominated their relationship.

So union learning is a win-win. It benefits workers, it gives better life chances, more fulfilling work, opportunities for career development. It benefits employers too, with improved skills, higher productivity, better industrial relations. Our aim now is to move this on to the next level, and we've been developing proposals for a new Union Academy to act as a new one-stop entry point to union learning, aiming to offer workers learning in a way that suits them, at a time that suits them, and I think this could represent an opportunity for a real step-change in the quantity, the quality and really the coherence of the union learning offer, and I'm looking forward to discussing these really exciting new ideas with Ruth in the coming weeks. I think this is increasing evidence that unions are really fully attuned to the skills challenges facing the UK.

But can the same be said of all of our employers? Now, I would certainly acknowledge that in many companies the slogan 'Our people are our most important asset' really means something, but it would be wrong I think for me as a rather lonely trade union voice at this event not to set out perhaps some of the more difficult challenges, because we have to face up to the fact that a voluntary approach is still not delivering in too many areas. Too many employers are taking a free ride when it comes to skills, and it's simply not good enough to blame the education system. I accept there are problems for sure with the basic skills of too many of our school leavers, though that's changing and changing fast, but in an age of rapid technological change and heightened competition, learning really has to be for life, so what happens in the workplace is as critical as what happens in the different parts of our education system. Now, Digby's absolutely right and I'm glad to hear him highlight for example the position in our Colleges of Further Education, which really need to be at the heart of our drive in the vocational skills area, and it's simply wrong that the workforce in that part of our education system is so badly paid, and as a consequence is certainly so badly demoralised, and we really need to get to grips with that problem. According to a MORI survey of 1500 workers recently, only a quarter are satisfied with the development opportunities they get at work, just one in 20 low-skilled workers regularly receive training opportunity from their employer, less than a third of British workers have intermediate skills compared to over half in France and Germany, so to quote the Chancellor, our *laissez-faire* training system has not and will not meet the skill needs of the future. Now, the government's said that when it comes to the voluntary approach, employers are in the last-chance saloon. Digby echoed that, used that phrase himself in his earlier remarks. Well, I just recall that back in 1991, when the CBI launched the initiative that led to the establishment of the National Education and Training Targets, Digby's predecessor at that time said, 'We are in the last-chance saloon. If the voluntary system does not meet these targets, we will have to face up to the need for a more radical change.' Well, we haven't met those targets, so we're still in the last-chance saloon, but I think we're reaching the point where they're calling for last orders and throwing-out time. Thanks for listening.