

# What Harriet Harman hasn't thought of is a woman's right to choose a less well paid job



MUDDLED: Equalities Minister Harriet Harman

FURIOUS indignation greeted Equalities Minister Harriet Harman's announcement last week that companies may be required to discriminate in favour of women and ethnic minorities to somehow 'even out the score' in the workplace. Many critics protested that the new Equality Bill would interfere with an employer's right to appoint the best candidate. But the real question is whether these measures can ever deliver the 'equality' that Ms Harman wants to engineer.

Let's get one thing clear – officially sanctioned discrimination on race, gender and religion is nothing new in Britain. Between the wars, it was considered perfectly fair that married women were legally barred from paid work. The rationale was that many men were war veterans and victims of the Depression who needed the chance to earn a decent 'family wage'. The trades unions eagerly supported the measure.

Educational institutions have long used group membership as selection tools, too. Until 1871, Jews and nonconformists could not attend Oxford or Cambridge. Today, Oxbridge has Government benchmarks to meet about how many State-educated students to admit. At 67 per cent, the State-school quota might well have ruled out privately educated Harriet Harman.

But now her Equality Bill aims to make it legal to discriminate against job candidates because of their sex or skin colour. What she proposes is that female trumps male and that black trumps white – criteria that are as useless when it comes to job selection as they are arbitrary.

Interestingly, they are the exact opposite of the affirmative action at some of America's posher universities, where admissions committees now favour male candidates because females tend to have stronger academic records and comprise more than 60 per cent of the university population.

Ms Harman seems not to have asked herself two crucial questions – whether using gender and race to discriminate between job candidates is fair and whether it will promote real equality.

Certainly, her proposal that companies first reveal a race and gender head count and then be permitted to reject the 'wrong' candidates to rejig its numbers is neither workable nor logical. On a practical front, what on earth should an employer do when faced with a choice between a white woman, a black man and a qualified person who is deaf or in a wheelchair and could be of either sex or any background?

When we consider any groups worthy of special treatment and others fair game for discrimination, the individual disappears. Instead, there is competition for victim status and any new worker from the preferred group risks being regarded by colleagues as the 'token' – which can hobble an employee far more effectively than their skin colour.

The new Bill is also logically flawed. The reason given for 'reverse discrimination' is that women constitute 50 per cent of the population and yet are not represented in equal numbers in every job at all levels.

The simplistic assumption is that gender discrimination lies behind any diversion from 50-50. Yet, even if bias still exists in some places, it no longer tells the whole story.

THE reality is that, since the Seventies, women have flooded into the domains that appeal to them while assiduously avoiding the ones that don't. The vast majority of professional degree courses are dominated by women (including veterinary science, medicine, pharmacy and law). Between 1971 and 1991 the number of female lawyers grew by 800 per cent.

In Britain, 56 per cent of all high-paying professional and managerial jobs are held by women, and a 2006 study of Fortune 500 – the American equivalent of FTSE 100 – companies has revealed that while half have no women in top jobs, the other half promote women to executive positions much faster than their more experienced male col-



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leagues. In major American cities young women out-earn men.

Yes, there are fewer female chief executives of major corporations but, given women's swift progress in so many areas, one has to ask whether Ms Harman has considered all the facts when she points her accusing finger at gender discrimination.

What if women's freedom to choose, namely the option to work part-time or at jobs they find meaningful, is skewing the picture? If so, there may be fewer women in certain jobs for the same reason that there are a tenth as many women in prison as men... there are simply not enough candidates.

In fact, Ms Harman's rhetoric relies on old canards and she often muddles her statistics. When she asks her audience to consider that 'if you are a woman working part-time you get 40 per cent less per hour on average than a man working full-time', she should have compared women who work part-time with men who work part-time – and at the very same jobs.

Part-time jobs pay less than full-time work and don't often lead straight to the executive floor. Yet 60 per cent more women than men are willing to make these

trade-offs to have more time. Many, of course, want more time with their families. But even unmarried women are more likely to choose to work part-time – one childless newspaper editor told me she works four days a week so she has time to play the piano.

In large corporations, 89 per cent of the professionals who choose to work reduced hours are women. Half are still working part-time six years later and the rest say they would like to – even if it excludes them from the top jobs.

What if, instead of being forcibly excluded, many women choose to turn down promotions or shun highly paid senior executive jobs because they don't want to work extreme hours, with the constant travel and frequent relocation that are the rule in such positions? Almost 40 per cent of women in high-level managerial jobs say they have made this choice.

It is also clear that a far higher percentage of women than men choose people-oriented, public-service jobs with a social purpose and this, too, affects their average earnings. It seems the deep-seated preferences of women – and men – affect Ms Harman's 'unequal' numbers.

A careful look at the data tells us that equal opportunities do not

create a mathematically equal result. Women typically allow their interests, desire to spend time with loved ones, health and personal happiness to play a role in their decision-making in the workplace.

And, at critical junctures in their careers, more women allow these interests to hold sway over the traditionally male values, namely high pay, professional status and swift promotion at all costs.

Ms Harman mistakenly assumes most women will automatically want what men have always wanted – and will define success by male standards.

BUT, tellingly, women in almost every Western country are more content with their work lives than men. Not only are they happier, but they live an average of five to six years longer and are more likely to keep their mental faculties into their senior years. One of the main reasons, according to epidemiologists, is that people who take the time to establish a complex network of friends and family are physically and psychologically healthier than people who don't.

This fact is nothing new. We have long known that the vast majority of women are not only more socially connected, they're healthier and live much longer than the majority of men. Their choices, along with their biology, help extend their lives.

And where's the equality and fairness in that?

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## Alcoholics and addicts – the new 'disabled'

THAT giant sucking sound you hear is the noise of money being vacuumed from the wages of productive workers into the pockets of dubious welfare claimants.

How can it be right for taxes to be used to subsidise alcoholics and drug abusers, in the guise of a questionable, inadequately monitored payment called 'Disability Living Allowance', which can be obtained without a doctor's letter?

All of us are happy to help look after the victims of genuine misfortune. But we expect the authorities to make sure that such assistance is given only to those who need it.

They are failing in this duty. Spending on DLA is growing at an extraordinary pace, which seems to have more to do with the number of people finding out about it than with the number of genuinely disabled people in this country.

Information obtained by The Mail on Sunday under freedom of information laws shows amazing increases in the numbers claiming DLA for 'drug and alcohol abuse' and among those claiming for 'learning difficulties'.

Sufferers of unspecified back pain and 'psychosis' – in many cases, the result of illegal cannabis smoking – also lined up in growing thousands to collect our cash.

We do not know how much of Britain's enormous £169 billion annual welfare bill is well or badly spent. We do know that it is almost a quarter of the national budget, and consumes every penny of the £160 billion paid in income tax by the working population.

This leaves all other Government spending to be met from borrowing, VAT, excise duties, National Insurance, council and corporation taxes.

The least we can ask is that these colossal sums are not distributed until proper objective tests have been made, and that people who have made themselves unemployable through illegal or anti-social habits should not qualify for help meant for the genuinely distressed.

We have been haunted too long by outdated images of the harsh dole system of 70 years ago, when so many were truly destitute. We have now swung much too far in the other direction.

### A civic disgrace

GEORGE Bernard Shaw once urged: 'Take care to get what you like or you will be forced to like what you get.' He was right. There is always a danger that people will get used to bad things, which then become normal – making even worse things possible.

We seem to be accustoming ourselves to living in physical and moral squalor, when we ought to be fighting hard against it. The Local Government Association should be ashamed of itself for its new posters supposedly explaining the role of local government.

Of course, town halls do an important job by clearing up the pools of vomit left by drunks and the excrement deposited by dogs with irresponsible owners. But hasn't it occurred to them that we pay them to do these things because we don't want to view such sights?

So the last thing we wish to see plastered on billboards are large photographic studies of puking drinkers and mounds of dog droppings. This material is childish, coarse and wrong. It will encourage the things it portrays. It should be withdrawn.