

Opening address; Today's and Tomorrow's Leaders

Vera Baird, Solicitor General and MP for Redcar

Vera Baird opened with an apology from Maria Eagle MP, Deputy Minister for Women and Equalities, who could not attend today.

Vera spoke of women in leadership positions and how we need more women in top positions. It is the human right of a woman to fulfil her potential, and it is fundamental to the economy to liberate all our best individuals. There are now more opportunities for women; they are over half the workforce; 3 out of 5 of first class graduates are women; we must ensure that rich talent is brought on.

Vera quoted the WLN gender research on career progression for women and on female principals, with women leading good Ofsted inspections, which makes a powerful business case for more women at the top. Vera quoted examples from the business and legal sectors where there are only four women in the higher echelons.

The Further Education sector is proactive in offering second chances to women returners. We need equal pay; a better career structure for women returners; better quality part-time work; better child care. She called for delegates from the FE sector where 36% of principals are women and 60% of teachers are women, to be strong role models for the 54,000 extra young students entering our colleges and institutions in the next year.

She welcomed the WLN-identified factors such as mentoring and coaching and family- friendly policies to ensure women are given the necessary opportunities in our work places.

Vera then outlined the government's position, giving full support to the Workforce Strategy Implementation Guide, produced by CEL, to increase diversity into the workforce; also backing LSIS as the sector-owned body to sustain FE provision, fund the Black Leadership Initiative (BLI), support disabled women into senior positions, managing trans-gender issues.

Vera concluded by providing information about the new Equality Bill introduced in April 09. She is taking this bill through the House of Commons. It is being scrutinised clause by clause and only yesterday she was presenting evidence to support the Bill.

The highlights of the Bill include a raft of measures such as:

- The expression of ways which positive action can be used
- Gender pay – shining a spotlight on current practice by banning pay secrecy clauses (which one third of the workforce have in their contracts). CIPD will work with the government on the implementation phase with public sector organisations and private businesses with 250 plus employers will also be encouraged to disclose pay information. The plan is to identify 'like-for-like' across sectors and categorise companies.

The government is determined to promote equality, underpinning £175 billion of procurement with positive action. A strategy running alongside the Equalities Bill is a consultation 'Working Towards Equality' about women's working arrangements and supporting family life and the needs of the workforce.

Vera called on conference delegates to continue their strong contribution in continuing the aims of the WLN, role modelling in our sector, and appreciating the efforts of government. She wished delegates a very, very successful day.