



## BLIND FORMER BRITISH HOME SECRETARY BACKS NEW CELL PHONE INITIATIVE



Former British Home Secretary and drafter of progressive disability laws, David Blunkett.

A blind former British Home Secretary, drafter of progressive disability laws and international advocate of equal rights for the disabled, David Blunkett, wants to champion a South African cell phone initiative giving disabled people internet access.

However, while most South Africans now carry cell phones, the two leading networks, MTN and Vodacom, say the cost of phones sophisticated enough to widely empower, for example, deaf and blind people, is too high for any major social responsibility initiative. An estimated 6% of South Africans are moderately to severely disabled.

Blunkett piloted Britain's Disability Amendment Act which massively extended rights for the disabled by honing in on, and making illegal, a host of discriminatory practices. He brought disability centre stage in Britain through high-profile media appearances and debate.

Addressing the Cape Town Press Club in April this year, he said the United Nations' Millennium Goals of

universal education, gender equality, empowering women, reducing child mortality, improving maternal health and combating HIV/AIDS were noble. However, while issues such as gender and race needed addressing, disability tended to 'fall off the end'.

'The real issue is that 82% of disabled people in the developing world are below the poverty line, meaning that 650 million people with absolute disabilities are struggling to get off the most basic poverty line and develop their talents so they are able to succeed.'

Disability had a greater impact on access to education than gender, household income or the rural/urban split and was magnified greatly when it came to children who, in a country like South Africa, were often further disadvantaged by the lack of transport.

A key task would be for the world's 80 million primary school children, a third of whom were disabled, to gain initial access to education. 'Whether we'll make it by 2015 (the Millennium Goal date) is an extremely moot point, but we have to try,' he added. He described education for disabled children as 'the foothold on the ladder of using their talent'.

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'I gather that a lot of people (South Africans), even in the most impoverished areas, have access to mobile phones and collective ways of recharging them. If we could just connect them to the world-wide web we could enable them to earn a living by using their talents without having to be somewhere else to make this possible.'

Blunkett warned that with the rampant HIV prevalence and high

unemployment in sub-Saharan Africa, people with disabilities who did not have HIV/AIDS (and who are less susceptible to catching it) would prove critical to the development of their countries. 'If we start to think in economic terms, maybe some international companies might be persuaded that working and liberating disabled people from their culture and background would benefit them as well.'

He hoped that an African debate would begin over transforming the liberal constitutions and UN human rights conventions (to which several countries were signatories) 'into a reality'. 'I'd like to do that without patronising people by implying that they could do with their limited resources what I did. Even for me it was a long hard haul... I don't know if I could do it again today, but I hope I might inspire others and their families to want to put disability on the agenda the way other issues are, and be a spur to action, not just warm words.'

Blunkett, born blind to an impoverished family in a deprived area of Sheffield, UK, lost his father when he was 12 and began work as a clerk typist. He attended a series of schools for the blind before acquiring a first-rate university education, lecturing in industrial relations and politics and serving on the Sheffield city council from 1970 to 1987 (most as mayor), when he was elected to Parliament (Labour Party). He became Secretary of State for education and employment when Labour took power in 1997 and Home Secretary when his party regained power in 2001. The last stint saw him concentrating on crime and antisocial behaviour and managing immigration and asylum. He resigned in December 2004, but remains an MP.



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His memoirs, known as *The Blunkett Tapes*, speak about the 'forgotten 650 million people with disabilities worldwide and the global campaign for an inclusive and lifelong education: the challenges facing the developed and developing world'.

No stranger to controversy through a high-profile extramarital affair and a drawn-out paternity suit at the height of his political career, Blunkett has entered popular culture in Britain. Thrice-portrayed in dramatic or musical form, one such was *Who's the Daddy?* and another satirical television film *A Very Social Secretary* (both 2005). The Sheffield Blind Institute even began a local club night, called 'the electric Blunkett'.

Blunkett told the Cape Town Press Club that changing attitudes and mindsets among the able and disabled was central to creating a more equal society. 'In the UK what we tried to do was to get disabled people off incapacity benefits and into work. We tried to provide a completely new assessment of what people can do rather than what they cannot do. To change the mindset of the employment centre so that people don't just hope to get on incapacity benefit, but get rehabilitated or retrained so they don't fall out of the system altogether.'

He said the British 'hand-out' mindset went back 25 years to when

unemployment was rife. Incapacity benefits were effectively used as a 'means of preventing a revolt – now we have to get off that'. He spoke strongly in favour of mainstreaming disabled children, but said this was only possible where specialist facilities could be 'drawn down' and used more widely.

'However, if inclusion is a way of pushing the issue under the carpet and getting someone else to deal with it, then it will merely disadvantage other children,' he stressed. The less time a child could spend in a special facility, the better it was 'for them and all those around'. 'The best way to build equality is for a disabled child to be in there in the classroom, living, breathing and being educated in real circumstances – we all have to live with the world as it is,' he said.

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Bryan Seligmann, Senior Data Manager at MTN, told *Izindaba* that his company had struggled to find technology that was both relevant and widely financially accessible to most disabled people. 'We don't want to just pay lip service or be viewed as cashing in on people with disabilities. Quite simply the technology is bigger than the network – it's all about the user device.'

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A Vodacom spokesperson agreed that 'assistive technology' came at a price, adding that 'manual dexterity' on small keyboards remained a problem. Vodacom offered phones with lip-synched video-calling at the same call rates as ordinary phones while 'speaking phones' announced everything that appeared on the screen, and included talking internet software which came at a price. Vodacom had a disabled person in charge of their employment equity programme and would 'go out of its way' to assist disabled customers via its 'Specific Needs' customer care team.

Cell phone companies paid a percentage of their revenues into a government universal access fund 'that has been sitting somewhere for 14 years'. She also suggested a tightening up of the definition of a 'needy person' in existing legislation. No satisfactory answer about the usage of this fund had emerged during parliamentary public hearings into disabilities and accessibility. A relevant regulatory spokesperson could not be found for comment by the *SAMJ* printing deadline.

Vocacom's Specific Needs cellphone number is 12580 (free to Vodacom service clients) or 082 12580 (standard rates).

**Chris Bateman**