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FOR THE MANY
NOT THE FEW

Speech by

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Shadow Secretary of State for
Work and Pensions

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Speech issued on a check against delivery basis

Debbie Abrahams MP, Shadow Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, speaking at the Labour Party Conference in Brighton today, said:

*****CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY*****

It is, once again, an honour to be speaking to you as Labour's Work and Pensions Secretary. Who would have thought that after leaving school at 15 with just 3 'O' levels I would be standing here today?

The passion I feel about building a fairer society has been with me for as long as I can remember. For more than 20 years, I worked to tackle inequalities in communities and beyond. And that's what drove me into politics. The more you get into what determines inequality, the more you realise that inequality is not inevitable. It's constructed.

The type of society we have, the tolerance and even the trust we feel towards one another, reflects how fairly we divide up our collective wealth. Ultimately these come down to political choices and leadership.

And people are seeing this now. They are seeing the stark contrast between Theresa May's Tories, protecting an increasingly wealthy elite, and Labour, under Jeremy Corbyn, whose entire political life has been dedicated to the many, not the few. His commitment is not a sound bite or a whim, it is who he is and has always been.

Over the past seven years, we have seen the effects of the Tories' ideologically-driven austerity policies. A record 7.4m working people living in poverty. Falling real wages, which remain lower than they were in 2008. An unprecedented rise in foodbank use, rough sleeping doubling, and more than 120,000 children and their families without a home. A typical UK worker would take 160 years to earn the average annual amount handed to a FTSE 100 boss. And for the first time in decades we are seeing life expectancy falling.

Conference, there can be nothing more unjust than knowing how long we live is determined by inequality in income, wealth and social position. It doesn't have to be this way. We are the fifth richest country in the world. As our Manifesto set out, the next Labour Government, will make different choices, fairer choices. For the many, not the few!

These widening inequalities have stifled growth, too. Differences in growth across the UK have led to inequalities in our labour markets as well. But the

Tories' social security policies have failed to respond to this changing world of work, where workers are often stuck in an endless 'low pay, no pay' cycle.

One of my constituents, a single mum who works as a nurse in a local hospital, came to see me at one of my surgeries in Oldham recently. In the process of transferring on to Universal Credit from tax credits, she had to wait more than 6 weeks for a payment, as over 1 in 4 people do. This delay and a number of other administrative issues meant that she couldn't pay all of her rent. When she came to see me, she had just been served an eviction notice.

In another case, Kellie, who's here today, is worried that she will have a similar experience when UC is rolled out in Wythenshawe. Although she's been on tax credits, she is off work from her cleaning job at Manchester airport, waiting for an operation. Being on statutory sick pay has eaten into her savings and she's now in rent arrears. She said if she had to wait at least six weeks to receive her UC payment, she's sure her family would end up being homeless.

Conference, on behalf of these women, and the six and half million families still to move on to Universal Credit, I'm calling on the Prime Minister to halt next month's UC roll out while we work to fix these issues.

Our social security system is also failing sick and disabled people. At last year's Conference I played the trailer from 'I, Daniel Blake', Ken Loach's iconic film about a man recovering from a heart attack, but found fit for work and battling for help from the Department for Work and Pensions.

Its impact in changing attitudes about social security claimants from the Tories' shirker/scrounger narrative, to the reality that the vast majority of claimants have contributed to the system all of their lives, cannot be under-estimated. And as Ken is also here this afternoon, I'd like to take this opportunity to thank him for all he has done.

But while the rhetoric might be changing, the reality is not, with cuts to social security support and the anguish of unfair assessments.

The United Nations' Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities recently reported that this Government's policies were leading to a 'human catastrophe'. Increasingly, sick and disabled people are facing poverty and isolation. As my Disability Equality Roadshow revealed, many feel like prisoners in their own homes; with dwindling social security support, too many are dying early, and even taking their own lives.

As we promised in our Manifesto with and for disabled people, Labour will deliver on the rights of disabled people, enshrining the UN Convention into UK law.

Conference, a Labour Government will transform our social security system from one that demonises, to one that is supportive and enabling. Like the NHS, it should be there for any one of us in our time of need, providing dignity and security for all.

For older people, this Tory Government has provided anything but dignity and security. Their failure to grapple with the pensions system has left many with dwindling workplace pensions or worse.

At the same time, the Tories have attacked the state pension, promising to increase the state pension age yet again. This has been most extreme for women born in the 1950s, many of whom have worked for well over 40 years and expected to retire at 60.

The acceleration of women's state pension equalisation by this Government has left hundreds of thousands of women in dire straits. I've heard of women sofa-surfing in their 60s, living off the kindness of family or friends, having used up all their savings, because they can no longer do the work they used to. Too often older people are discriminated at work, as well as when they try to get into work. A Government Minister suggested that women should go and find an apprenticeship during a recent debate!

These women feel understandable anger that they have done the right thing and that the Government has failed to deliver its side of the bargain. I have been meeting with them on my national pensions tour. We promised in our Manifesto to provide pension credit and additional support to the two and a half million 1950s women still waiting to retire.

As a starter, I can announce today that a Labour Government in power now, would allow these women to retire up to two years early.

Conference, this is the difference a Labour Government would make. My challenge to this Government is to do the same and to do it now. Thank you Conference, thank you to my wonderful team, and to my loving family. Now let's get on with getting Labour into Government!

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