

**Alan Johnson MP, Secretary of State for Work and Pensions**

**Health and Safety Commission open meeting 12 October 2004**

I'm delighted to be able to come and talk to you today – to pay tribute to the work of the Commission, the Health and Safety Executive and all those who have done so much to improve health and safety at work in this country.

It's a fair bet that tomorrow's headlines will be dominated by the work of a different Commission – the Pensions Commission - who have today published their first report on the challenges facing this country in the long term provision of pensions.

But the challenges that face us in pensions are a direct result of the fact that people are living longer healthier lives. Our achievements as a society:

- whether it be the provision of free healthcare based on need rather than on an ability to pay; or
- the transformation of workers' rights in terms of the safety standards that they can expect have been crucial in raising the standard of living for all people in this country.

30 years ago, when I was wearing my tank top and flares, in 1974 when I first became an official of the Post Office Workers' Union, it was these battles, to transform the world of work - not pensions - that were the priority.

Before the 1974 Act, approximately 8 million employees had no legal safety protection at work. Some worked in the most appalling conditions – many lives were at risk whether from physical injury or from the long-term affects of materials such as asbestos.

Fatalities have fallen by two-thirds in those 30 years. Both the number of fatalities and the number of non-fatal injuries are down in each main industry sector – and overall, the number of reported non-fatal injuries has also fallen to a third of what it was in 1974.

I know my colleague Jane Kennedy paid tribute this morning to the energy and commitment of the Health and Safety Commission and Executive.

But I want to add my tribute to you – and all your partners here today for what I understand has been a very successful meeting, and for what you have done to make this difference to the lives of so many workers across the country.

Next week, as you probably know, is European Health and Safety week – a week we enter not just as a European leader in this field – but with one of the best health and safety records in the World.

That's a major tribute to all of you here today. You should be proud of that achievement.

We should celebrate what we have secured – but equally we must not forget what is still to be done. I said a moment ago that the number of fatalities is a third of what it was 30 years ago – but this means that there were still 168 fatal injuries to employees in 2003/04 – and 235 fatal injuries if you include the self-employed.

We must re-energise safety improvement and we must also meet the challenge of occupational health.

40 million working days were lost to occupational injury and ill health in 2001/02 – 33 million of these were attributed to ill health.

What's more, 1 million people a week take sick leave – and while the majority will return to work quickly, in an average week 3000 people are off sick for more than 6 months and of those 80% will not be back at work again for 5 years.

Aside from the economic cost – there is a very real human cost to industry, society and individuals.

What's needed is a new approach – building on our very real early successes – but taking a more strategic, partnership-based approach in both private and public sectors.

We need an approach that responds to the changing nature of the workplace – with fewer large firms, more SMEs and many more people working part time.

What's needed is to tackle the prevention of risk at work together with a greater emphasis on rehabilitation.

That's what the Commission's strategy for workplace health and safety to 2010 and beyond does. And I am fully committed to working with the Commission to achieve its revitalisation targets and ensure that this strategy is fully implemented.

This approach builds on the very real strength of the Commission and Executive's link with my Department – delivering on our collective ambition to promote opportunity and independence, with a healthy and productive workforce.

And the strategy confirms the intention to understand and place greater value on the contribution of others – not just employers but everyone including workers, their representative organisations and professional bodies.

It is this partnership working that I would particularly like to emphasise to you today.

Let me take employers first. Occupational health and safety is increasingly being seen as an integral part of workplace well-being - as well as an integral part of effective business management – so it's an enabler not a hindrance.

The Commission's case studies have shown that the business argument for good health and safety management is crystal clear.

The businesses in these studies developed an initiative or programme to promote good health and safety management – and in return enjoyed benefits such as £11million of savings through reduced sickness absence, and a reduction in health insurance spending of £200,000 a year.

One company estimated that in financial terms, the benefits of a new rehabilitation scheme – which reduced average absence after injury from 26 days to 4 – outweighed costs by 12:1.

I want to encourage businesses to reap these benefits – which means that we must make them more widely understood and accepted.

And I am very keen that Government as an employer continues to demonstrate the benefits of successful health and safety management to the private sector.

Jane will have mentioned this morning – that she now chairs a Ministerial Task Force which exists to provide the lead for public sector improvements in the management of health, not only as an employer, but as a procurer of goods and services, and also in Government as a standard setter.

Equally, we have to strive for greater worker involvement. Employees are an organisation's greatest asset – able to spot issues and bring about real improvements. This is particularly important in meeting the challenge of occupational health.

As your Chair, Bill Callaghan, has pointed out – Managers can not “engineer out” stress – by its definition it is to do with the employee's perception that work pressures are too great.

Unions have a valuable role to play here. Research shows that organisations with union safety committees have 50% lower injury rate per thousand than the average.

And the presence of Union committees and representatives lower the odds not just of injury but also illness when compared with arrangements that merely inform employees of Occupational Health Issues.

Earlier this year we launched the Workers' Safety Adviser Challenge Fund and we are using this to encourage the voluntary expansion of worker involvement in health and safety across all sectors of business and the voluntary and public sectors.

"The protection of the worker from sickness, disease and injury arising out of employment" is the cornerstone of the Constitution of the International Labour Organisation. It's also a cornerstone of any civilised society – and it must continue to be our lodestar.

We have come a long way in the last 30 years. We are going further in the next 6 years to 2010 and beyond.

I can't promise you a stress-free journey. I can't even promise you that it will be as high profile as the challenges we face in pensions and welfare reform – but it's every bit as important to me as Secretary of State – and every bit as important for employees both today and in the future.

I know that I can count on the Commission, Executive and all our partners to work together to help us make this vision a reality.