

**‘I know someone who is trying to start her own business but she can’t save enough from her benefits to build up the capital to give the business a chance of working. As soon as she makes any money to invest in the business, they cut her benefits so she has to spend her savings to get by and then go back on benefits. Why not let her claim benefits at the same time as working so that she could invest some money in her business?’**

**Nicky, 27**

**GORDON BROWN**

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**In Conversation with Alya Din**

**We always complain that politicians don't ever really talk to the people they are supposed to be helping. Here, the Chancellor of the Exchequer talks to Alya Din, a New Deal trainee, about her experience of the youth employment scheme the Government set up in 1997**

**GB:** You've got a wonderful name, Alya, A.L.Y.A.

**AD:** Thank you.

**GB:** It's a very nice name.

**AD:** It's the name of an Arabian Princess.

**GB:** Is it? We must call you Princess Alya.

**AD:** That's what I do prefer. (Laughter).

**GB:** You're going to write an article are you? Based on what I say?

**AD:** Yes, so here are the questions. When you were setting up the New Deal Training Scheme, what problems were you trying to solve?

**GB:** I came from Fife in Scotland and we had, at one stage, 30,000 miners and we've now got less than a thousand, and you could see how for the young people the obvious thing to do, 20 years ago and 10 years ago, was to find a job in mining. But there are no jobs left in that, so people now realise that they have got to get skills and qualifications, and if they don't have skills or get training then they're not going to get jobs that pay well. So what we are trying to do is help the sort of young people that I meet in my constituency who maybe, 20 years ago, would have gone into mining, or maybe in your area would have gone on to work in engineering or something. That's what the New Deal is about. If people are unemployed when they are young, they will tend to be unemployed when they are older and if they are long-term unemployed, unemployed for lots of months and lots of years, they will tend to be unemployed for even longer periods of time when they get older. So we thought we would help the thousands

of young people who are unemployed into working. We taxed the utility companies, gas and electricity, we took five billion pounds – five thousand million pounds – in tax, so that we could provide a service for young people to get jobs. That's the inspiration behind the New Deal. It's *wrong* for any young person not to have anything to do. I think it's *wrong* if we provide the opportunity for people to stay at home and do nothing as well.

**AD:** I'm a 22-year-old university graduate, brought up in north-east London. Would you say that I'm a typical New Deal trainee?

**GB:** I think you're very well qualified and we've got to help you get a job. We are now in a situation where there are probably a million vacancies in the British economy – there are about 200,000 in London and the South East – so what we've got to do is to help the people without jobs to find the jobs that need to be filled. We're doing a number of things that I hope will help, not only helping people get more skills but getting people more information about the jobs that are available.

**AD:** In the end, though, someone has got to do the dead-end jobs, like stacking shelves in Sainsbury's. What do you do if no one wants to stack shelves in Sainsbury's?

**GB:** When I was a student, like you've been a student, I took any job that was available so that I could get work and have some income. If you start in what some people call a starter job, it doesn't mean that it's a dead-end. It means it's a start for you to do the next job, and then the next job, and then the next job. We want people to see jobs as a ladder of opportunities. And that's why we have implemented a policy where there's a minimum wage.

**AD:** I get £56 a week on the New Deal: how do you expect me to spend this?

**GB:** Well that's up to you. (Laughter). How *do* you spend it?

**AD:** Well, what I mean is, when you set out the amount, how did

you decide that £56 was enough?

**GB:** Everybody starts somewhere and that was what we could afford, having taxed the utilities to get money to pay for employment programmes for a whole parliament.

**AD:** Do you think it's enough to live on?

**GB:** Well, I think that it's what we could afford as a government, but obviously you will want to move on and get a job and then get a better income and perhaps get an even better job with an even better income... so you've got to see it as a start.

**AD:** How would *you* spend £56?

**GB:** Well, I would... well, the obvious starting point is food, isn't it? And then you've got to work out from there. Do you stay with relatives or at home?

**AD:** Yes I live at home with my mum.

**GB:** And she's helpful, is she?

**AD:** Yes, very.

**GB:** We've got to see everything as a start to the next thing, which will lead to the next thing. I don't want anybody to feel they're in dead-end jobs. Remember, ten years ago, there were almost three million people unemployed in Britain, now there are far less. There's lower unemployment in Britain than there has been for 20 years. It's not true now to say there are no opportunities – though obviously we want to get the opportunities in the right place at the right time for the people who need them.

**AD:** How do you budget your own personal life?

**GB:** I don't budget it. (Laughter). Well, I try not to spend more than I have.

**AD:** As a member of the Cabinet, you must have most things paid for you. Do you ever have to spend any of your own money?

**GB:** Oh yes, all the time. I don't have most things paid for me; I buy most things. (Laughter). And, as you must know, when Labour came into government we froze the pay of Cabinet ministers

for the first year – first *two* years.

**AD:** Going back to the New Deal, one of the things my friends and I have found is that it is very inflexible. As part of our six-month training, we are obliged to do an NVQ Level 2 in information and technology, a basic computer skills course. I feel that in my case it's a waste of time – I'm actually also attending an evening class in website design on the Internet, so I have quite an advanced knowledge of computers, but I am not allowed to do any other course. Why is this not permitted?

**GB:** You must write and protest and we'll see what we can do. If you've already got the qualification and you say you want to do something else and get another qualification, then you should.

**AD:** But a lot of us have asked for this and we were told there is no way that we can do anything else.

**GB:** Well then I shall take that up, and I'll ask questions about that, and I'll get Stephen Timms, your local MP, to write to you. Obviously, it's far better if people can get the benefit they need.

**AD:** It also seems to me that the New Deal is very much geared towards administration work. Is this the case?

**GB:** No, because there are a number of different parts of the New Deal. There's a New Deal option where you work with voluntary organisations, a New Deal where you can be taken on by private organisations, and that can be anything. There's a New Deal that's an environmental task force and a New Deal that's a training course, providing places at college – so it's not necessarily the case that it's administrative work at all... although there are a lot of jobs in administration at the moment.

**AD:** And what if someone wants to be a stuntman?

**GB:** Well, they should be able to qualify. We had a debate about this, about whether musicians and people training to be singers could qualify for the New Deal – and eventually we decided that we could help. But I don't know about stuntmen.

**AD:** Do you think there are other ways in which the New Deal could be improved?

**GB:** We are trying to extend it to the long-term unemployed – that’s adults. We’re then extending it to lone parents. And we’re about to introduce new measures to help disabled people. We’re also about to introduce a new measure for the over 50s, people who lost a job and need to get another job but want to have particular help to get back into work.

**AD:** Have you ever been unemployed?

**GB:** I was unemployed after I left university, but not for long – a few weeks. But remember, unemployment has gone down. There are 600,000 new jobs since we came into government... What I’m trying to persuade people is that we can get a situation where, instead of assuming that three million or two million or even one million people are unemployed, we actually give most people who want to work a chance to work.

**AD:** If, after six months on the New Deal, I don’t find a job, what do you suggest I do?

**GB:** We want to give you all the help that we can to find a job. Are you applying for lots of jobs at the moment?

**AD:** Yes, all the time.

**GB:** Where do you find them advertised – in the ‘job centres’? Or do you find them advertised in newspapers?

**AD:** Yes, newspapers.

**GB:** And have you had some interviews recently?

**AD:** Yes.

**GB:** And you’re still waiting to hear?

**AD:** Yes.

**GB:** Well, you’ve got lots of applications in so I hope something turns up. There are opportunities and I hope you can benefit from them.

**AD:** It seems that in some ways, as far as the Government is

concerned, offering training schemes to young unemployed people who *want* a job is easy. What do you do about people who *don't* want to do anything?

**GB:** If you're a young person who is unemployed and you're claiming benefit and we're providing lots of opportunities to get either work or training or work experience or education then I don't think you should get benefit unconditionally... if you just stay at home and do nothing.

**AD:** But there are people who just don't want to work.

**GB:** Then we've got to help them get back into work and coach them if necessary.

**AD:** But how do you motivate them?

**GB:** We've been looking at different programmes around the country, and actually Community Links does a lot of work, and we obviously want to find people who will help people who are either demotivated or disillusioned or who found their experience of college, or not college, unhelpful to them. Or people who have perhaps had a problem with crime or drugs or something. We want to provide a helper, a coach or a mentor, or whatever you call it, who will help... So gradually we'll get through to people. I don't want any young person to sit at home and say there's no opportunity because there *is* opportunity. And I don't want us just to pay out benefit and say, 'We'll forget about you but we'll give you a few pounds a week.' I want to say, 'Look, we'll help you, we'll give you some more financial help, we'll give you a coach or someone to train you, we'll give you help to get a qualification – but you've got to take up the opportunity, you can't just stay at home doing absolutely nothing.'

**AD:** One of the things me and my friends have found is that the benefits system can be quite bureaucratic and rigid. For example, when I was temping, sometimes I'd work on an assignment which lasted five or six weeks, then have three weeks without work, and it

didn't seem worth my while signing on because you have to fill in a 36-page form every time, wait for hours, then wait another few weeks before a cheque comes through. After doing that two or three times, it put me off and I didn't bother going to sign on. Why don't you reform that system so that it is a little more helpful?

**GB:** Well maybe we should get you to redesign that – on the Internet! (Laughter).

**AD:** You fill in the form and sign on; then, after doing a job for a while, when you go back to sign on you have to fill in another whole form again.

**GB:** Do you not have a copy of the form you filled in in the first place?

**AD:** They don't keep them – why don't they?

**GB:** Maybe because there are lots of forms around. I don't know. Obviously you don't want to spend lots of time filling in forms – you want a *job*.

**AD:** Why can't they be more helpful?

**GB:** Can you not keep a copy yourself?

**AD:** They don't allow that.

**GB:** Well, we'll have to have a look at this. Of course, the important thing for you is that you don't want to have to fill in the form at all, you just want to keep working.

**AD:** Do you like *your* job?

**GB:** Some of it.

**AD:** But, do you really enjoy it or do you do it just for the money?

**GB:** I would do it if there was no money, but obviously I've got to survive.

**AD:** Have you ever wanted to be prime minister?

**GB:** I'm quite happy doing the job that I do.

**AD:** So you've never wanted to be prime minister?

**GB:** Don't know. We'll see.

**AD:** What's the most extravagant thing you have ever bought?

**GB:** Bought? I don't know. My house, I suppose. (Laughter)

**AD:** Moving on to a more serious issue, how realistic are the current moves, Net Aid, for example, to try and cancel all world debt?

**GB:** This is very important. If we can reduce a country's debt and at the same time make sure money goes not into military expenditure or corrupt expenditure, but into health and education and eliminating poverty, that is something that is very worth doing. And to do it in the Millennium is very important as well – we are going to wipe off a hundred billion dollars, *a hundred thousand million dollars*.

**AD:** What are your visions for the Millennium?

**GB:** (Roars of laughter, then pause). One of Britain where there's opportunity for all and where everybody makes a contribution. A world where people feel they are free from fear: fear of poverty, fear of violence, as well as fear of ignorance and fear of unemployment. I think if the Millennium teaches us anything it's that, if people come together and pursue high ideals, then they can achieve a great deal. And that's not politicians, it's the people.

**AD:** Do you think, in my lifetime, I, or someone like me, could become chancellor of the exchequer?

**GB:** Yes. Yes, I hope so – there's never been a woman chancellor...

**Alya Din**, 22, is a university graduate. Last year she did a six-month work placement at Community Links on the New Deal