

## National

# Coalition review makes equality law 'toothless'

**Claim that only 90% of legislation to be enacted**

**Fawcett Society analysis rejected by Equality Office**

**Amelia Hill**

The Equality Act has been rendered "virtually toothless" by the government's admission that only part of the legislation will be implemented when it comes into effect today, according to campaigners.

The failure to implement the act in full "undermines every speech coalition ministers ever gave endorsing the notion of a fairer Britain", says the Fawcett Society, which campaigns for gender equality.

As intended, the act would have brought in powers requiring big businesses to establish whether they have a pay gap between men and women. It had the power to prevent pay secrecy clauses being used to hide unfair differences between what men and women are paid.

But only about 90% of the act will come into force today, after the government said it is reviewing several sections of the legislation passed by parliament in April.

Ceri Goddard, chief executive of the society, said refusing the whole act was a sign the government had failed "a litmus test of their commitment to fairness ...

"Rowing back on the requirement for big business to publish and take action on any differences in pay between men and women employees - so to conduct gender pay audits - is tantamount to endorsing the shocking gender pay gap.

"The act isn't perfect, but failing to implement it in full sends out a clear signal that creating a more equal society is a low priority for the coalition."

Alongside concern over combating the

pay gap, Goddard is also worried about a government plan to review the mechanism for those who may face "double discrimination", such as black women, to bring a single claim, saying it means some of those most at risk of discrimination will find it harder to defend themselves.

"Scrapping the positive action clause that would allow organisations to better address under-representation of people with protected characteristics would also be a backwards step - especially at a time of rising unemployment," she said. "Watering down equality law in a recession weakens what little protection some of the most marginalised have."

Edward Wanambwa, at Russell-Cooke solicitors, said the act was "the most ambi-

**'The government seems determined to implement the act in name only'**

tious and overarching piece of discrimination legislation for decades".

But Deborah Casale, at Gannons solicitors, said that even in its original form the act did not make huge changes.

"The biggest change surrounds disability discrimination and the partial ban of pre-employment medical questionnaires, which means employers will only be able to ask health questions in very limited circumstances ... this will no doubt become a grey area in the law."

An Equalities Office spokesman said: "The society's press release is inaccurate and misleading.

"It has always been planned for the provisions in the Equality Act to come into force at different times, to allow time for the people and organisations affected by the new laws to prepare for them."