

DISABILITY POLITICS AND THE DISABILITY MOVEMENT IN BRITAIN: WHERE DID IT ALL GO WRONG?

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In earlier publications we suggested that the pursuit of a single aim or goal in disability politics would be a mistake and was bound to lead to a dilution in the collective energy and commitment of disabled people and would ultimately achieve little. Although we used slightly different language we argued that what has now come to be known as the rights based approach to disability would be counter-productive if pursued as an end in itself rather than as a means to an end. Having legal rights does not mean that they will be enforced and even if they are, that enforcement will achieve the desired aims.

Narrow legalistic approaches tend to benefit those professionals who work in the rights industry as much if not more than those they are supposed to serve. We further suggested that organisations of disabled people were needed to ensure that such an approach remained accountable to disabled people who, after all, had produced the idea in the first place.

By the middle of the 1990s, we saw the rise of many organisations controlled and run by disabled people at

local, national and international levels to the point where we were able to suggest that these organisations constituted **the** disabled peoples' movement with the potential to exert a powerful influence on political and social change. In one article we warned that even at the high point of this development the movement faced a number of dilemmas *'To get too close to the Government is to risk incorporation and end up carrying out their proposals rather than ours. To move too far away is to risk marginalisation and eventual demise. To collaborate too eagerly with the organizations for disabled people risks having our agendas taken over by them, and having them presented both to us and to politicians as theirs. To remain aloof risks appearing unrealistic and/or unreasonable, and denies possible access to much needed resources'*.

Here we want to suggest that this caution was justified, and that the drift toward a rights based approach that now dominates disability politics has compounded the problem. Indeed, since the turn of the millennium we have witnessed the growing professionalisation of disability rights and the wilful decimation of organisations controlled and run by disabled people at the local and national level by successive government policies despite rhetoric to the contrary. As a result we no longer have a strong and powerful disabled people's movement and the struggle to improve disabled people's life chances has taken a step backwards.

In making this argument we are not seeking to apportion blame and make veiled personal attacks, nor exempt ourselves from taking some responsibility as disability activists engaged in much of what has happened. Instead we hope to provide an analysis of what we think has gone wrong in the hope that we can help reverse the situation.

Is the disabled peoples' movement dying?

A number of people, some writing in Coalition, have already announced the death of the movement. This is not a view we share though undoubtedly the movement has been in decline since the mid 1990s. There are several reasons for this.

Not too long ago the big disability charities had opposed the idea that disabled people should have their right not to be discriminated against enshrined in law. However the publication of a report produced by the Committee on Restrictions Against Disabled People in 1982 forced them to rethink their position. By the mid 1980s they set up their own think tank, called 'Voluntary Organisations For Anti-Discrimination Legislation' (VOADL).

Ironically BCODP was invited to send a representative to the first meeting which was held at a venue completely inaccessible to wheelchair users. Despite this BCODP continued to participate in

VOADL meetings but with 'observer status' only. This situation remained until the 1990s when VOADL became Rights Now as the impetus for anti-discrimination legislation (ADL) intensified.

After the failure of several parliamentary attempts to get ADL onto the statute books Rights Now organised a mass rally in 1994 in Trafalgar Square. Speaker after speaker, both from the disability charities and the disabled peoples' movement expressed their anger at Government's failure to act and demanded proper civil rights legislation. This rally represented a full about face for the disability charities who not only insisted that disabled people already had rights but also attempted to claim this idea as their own, thus attempting to rewrite disability history in the process.

By this time disabled peoples' increasing self-confidence had meant that many disabled people were now willing to take to the streets and participate in peaceful direct action. Formed in 1992 the Direct Action Network (DAN) co-ordinated these activities and also kept the pressure on Government by targeting particular parliamentary constituencies for mass demonstrations.

All this made the passage of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) inevitable and in 1995 such legislation was duly passed. However the disabled peoples' movement had major concerns that the DDA was neither comprehensive nor enforceable. In

response, the Government established a task force to oversee its implementation and although the BCODP refused to participate the disability charities fell over themselves to nominate members.

Some disabled individuals who had previously occupied leadership roles in the disabled people's movement chose to participate as they felt it was better to be involved and hence able to influence change rather than remain in isolation. This remained the situation when New Labour was elected and the task force was disbanded and a Disability Rights Commission (DRC) appointed.

For many people these developments signalled the coming of age of disability politics and that future progress would ensure that disabled people would finally achieve their goal of full inclusion into mainstream society.

But as mentioned above we do not share this view. The coming to power of a new Government seemingly more willing to listen to the voice of disabled people was a problem in itself. This was because the movement had cut its teeth on oppositional politics and had little experience of participating with politicians. The big charities however were only too willing to step in and fill the void.

Consequently since the late 1990s the combination of Government and the big charities have successfully

adopted the big ideas of the disabled people's movement, usurped its language, and undertaken further initiatives which promise much yet deliver little. Anyone who doubts this need only refer to the recently published report from the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit "Improving the Life Chances of Disabled People".

Although it has striven to maintain parliamentary links of its own, the BCODP, historically, one of the leading organisations in the disabled people's movement, has experienced considerable political isolation in the last few years. It has also, along with many other organisations of disabled people, found it difficult to attract core funding, particularly as Government was more concerned to support the DRC and its other initiatives, none of which are accountable to disabled people. It has also run into difficulties in seeking to promote the idea of independent living.

Initially it did this through the BCODP Independent Living Sub-Committee. This later emerged as a separate organisation called the National Centre for Independent Living (NCIL). Not only did this mean that NCIL was no longer directly accountable to disabled people, but also as the Government was its main source of funding it was in no position to challenge seriously the government's view that direct payments and independent living were the same thing. NCIL's position has been weakened still further over

recent months as their funding has been reduced and staff have been made redundant.

The political influence of DAN has also declined. Shortly after New Labour came to power in 1997 it pulled off its most spectacular demonstration of all. The Government, with an extremely large majority, was exercising its power by tackling the expensive and seemingly intractable problem of the rising cost of Incapacity Benefit. Their aggressive approach to reducing these costs provoked considerable anxiety amongst vulnerable groups of disabled people. DAN targeted Downing Street and a small number of disability activists got as far as the Prime Minister's front door and threw red paint over it, symbolising the blood of disabled people that would be shed if the Government plans were passed.

This demonstration attracted widespread international attention as far apart as New Zealand and America and the plans were quietly dropped. While this was a success for DAN in one sense, it left it with a difficult legacy to follow. As DAN was committed to peaceful direct action it was virtually impossible to organise something bigger or better and while DAN has continued its influence has steadily declined. The paradox of failing at the moment of success can be described thus "There's no success like failure and failure's no success at all" (Bob Dylan).

Most importantly, despite the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit Report claim that by the year 2010 every locale 'should have a user led organisation modelled on an existing CIL' (p. 67) there is a wealth of evidence from a variety of sources, showing that existing CILs are closing down at an alarming rate due to a denial of resources by local authorities and government agencies.

There is another factor in the decline of the disabled peoples' movement and this is the very real toll that impairment takes on both the leadership and other activists within the movement. Through untimely deaths and burn out, the movement has been robbed of many important members long before their contributions have been completed. Of course, all political movements suffer from this but, we would argue, not to anything like the same extent.

Where are we now?

Recently DEMOS was commissioned by SCOPE to revisit the original BCODP Report on discrimination with a view to assessing the progress that has been made since then. Overall the report, entitled 'Disablist Britain: barriers to Independent Living for disabled people in 2006', concludes that despite all the apparent progress that has been made since the original report was launched, the underlying reality is that disabled people continue to face the same

barriers that they have always faced and that 'disablism remains rife throughout Britain'.

So progress over the last 10 years has been more apparent than real. Alongside this we have seen the decline in both the numbers and influence of organisations controlled by disabled people and the commensurate resurrection of the big charities. Additionally, the Government has created a number of new non-accountable organisations including the DRC and the Office of Disability Issues. It has also shown a willingness to recognise and support the big charities as the supposed legitimate voice of disabled people.

In our view all this is extremely dangerous for disabled people. Our history has taught us that in the recent past these organisations played a leading role in keeping us oppressed and out of society. Name changes, tidying up their language and employing token disabled people cannot disguise the underlying reality that these agencies are interested primarily in self preservation and that they will say and do anything that is politically expedient in order to retain their influence in Government circles. Perhaps all this would not matter if we could all look forward to a peaceful future in which living standards continually rise and are distributed evenly throughout society. We do not believe this to be the case and it is to this which we now must turn.

The future

Not only do disabled people continue to face the same economic, social and political barriers we have always faced, but this is now coupled with the culture of death making that increasingly confronts disabled people in Britain and across the world. There are those currently who are happy to genetically engineer disabled people out of existence or euthanise us as we grow old.

Those who support such strategies argue that they are for our own benefit and in our own interest. How long will it be before it is argued that we are too expensive to be financially supported throughout our lives and that we serve no economic purpose when we grow old? Can we rely on the big charities to fight for our right to exist, particularly if it conflicts with Government policy and we no longer have a strong disability movement to represent our views?

Indeed, the choices available to disabled activists in the new millennium are different than those that went before. The gradual shift away from institutional to community 'care' over the last thirty years, the accompanying growth of disability benefits, the introduction of the DDA and the Community Care (Direct Payments) Act and the establishment of Government sponsored 'disability' bodies such as the DRC and the ODI, and the effective re-branding of

disability politics as a rights issue promotes illusion of equality and inclusion. Although the reality is quite different, these developments will make it much more difficult to generate a new and re-vitalised disabled people's movement to fight for meaningful change. Whether a third generation of disability activists can rise to this challenge remains to be seen. We sincerely hope so as the current situation does not bode well for the future of disabled people.

Conclusion

In this brief article we have tried to better understand the issues facing disabled people in twenty first century Britain. Clearly we were over-optimistic about the role of new social movements in producing significant social change. Many of the movements operating in the last century have either been incorporated into Government or become marginal to the political process. Regrettably, we would suggest, this has become the temporary fate of the disabled people's movement. Most significantly, there has been no coming together of the disabled people's movement and other political groups, such as the Lesbian and Gay movement, for example, to create more powerful alliances. And, in some respects the social divisions that characterised British society in the twentieth century, such as ethnicity, race, and religion, for instance, have widened.

Most importantly, the prohibition of racism by law has done little to eliminate these problems. By the same token, the singular focus on disability as a rights issue will not solve the problem of disability discrimination and oppression. At best, it will benefit only a very small minority of the disabled population: those with plenty of money to spend and those employed in the legal and related professions. At worst, it will legitimise further the rhetoric of those who support an inherently unjust and inequitable society and hamper further the struggle for meaningful equality and justice.

We still believe that the only viable long-term political strategy for disabled people is to be part of a far wider struggle to create a better society for all. It is a struggle that must take on board the fact that twentieth century Britain is a society near the top of world league tables for illiteracy, teenage pregnancy, childhood obesity, school exclusions and relative poverty. All of this must be contextualised within a global society characterised by an exploding human population, growing cultural conflict, climatic change and environmental degradation. These are the issues that today's generation will almost certainly have to address if the struggle for a society fit for all is to be achieved.

Reference

Cabinet Office 2005: *Improving the Life Chances of Disabled People*, London: HMSO. (Available at:

http://www.strategy.gov.uk/downloads/work_areas/disability/disability_report/index.htm)

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