

COLIN BARNES

DISABLED PEOPLE IN BRITAIN AND
DISCRIMINATION

A Case for Anti-Discrimination Legislation

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British Council of Organizations of Disabled People

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FOREWORD

The often-held perception is that in highly industrialised societies disabled people are 'well taken care of'. In Britain, disabled people know only too well that this is a fallacy. For years they have struggled to bring their case to the attention of authorities who can change the situation. Their efforts have been thwarted time and time again. According to Nicholas Scott, the Minister for Disabled People, discrimination occurs because of ignorance rather than ill-will. But this book clearly shows, with hard facts, that good-will is not enough.

Historically, disabled people have been perceived as clients of social services. The perception was that the dole of charity-givers was sufficient to provide for their needs. This perception has slowly started to change. All over the world, disabled people are uniting to demand their rights. In 1982 the United Nations adopted the World Programme of Action which provided a guideline for the Decade of Disabled Persons (1983-92). It clearly states that disabled people have the same rights as others in their societies, and that it is the responsibility of governments to protect and promote those rights. A number of governments have taken action to do this. In Canada, disabled people were specifically included in the Constitution in 1983, and the amended Human Rights legislation also includes them. In the United States, the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) attacks discrimination and seeks to remove the institutional barriers. When President Bush signed the Act, he said: 'Let the shameful wall of exclusion finally come tumbling down.'

Clearly, charity and social services are not enough to remove the discrimination that disabled people face in their societies. In Britain the entrenched charity model has been a double-edged sword. Not only has it failed to attack discriminatory practices but it has developed the myth that disabled people are well provided for. This book provides hard and solid data for a statement of mine reported in the Guardian on 2 June 1986 that disabled people in Britain are in fact worse off than those in many developing countries. This is indeed a harsh reality that many are reluctant to face. Nevertheless, one needs to accept the facts if change is to be made. Those responsible for this book are to be congratulated for clearly portraying the facts as they are. In objective analysis they paint a picture of the reality of disabled people in Britain. That picture is not very complimentary. It must be hoped that the stark truth of reality will motivate a war on institutional discrimination.

July 1991

HENRY ENNS
Executive Director
Disabled Peoples International

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study was conceived, sponsored and written with the full cooperation of disabled people and their organizations, in particular the British Council of Organizations of Disabled People (BCODP). From its inception in 1989 the project has been under the direction of Dr Mike Oliver, Reader in Disability Studies at Thames Polytechnic, London. Its development has been closely monitored by a research advisory group chaired by Jane Campbell (London Boroughs Disability Resource Team and deputy chair of BCODP) which included Stephen Bradshaw (Executive Director of the Spinal Injuries Association), Caroline Glendinning (Haldsworth's Research Fellow in the Department of Social Policy at the University of Manchester), Mike Oliver and Richard Wood (Director of BCODP).

Initially the project was jointly funded by Charity Projects and the Joseph Rowntree Memorial Trust. But since 1 January 1991, it has been supported solely by the latter. Research facilities were provided by the Department of Social Policy and Sociology at the University of Leeds.

My involvement with the project did not begin until 1 January 1990, following my appointment as principal research officer for BCODP. However, although I have been involved in disability issues and disability research for the past 10 years my interest in the subject is not simply academic, it stems from personal experience. I was born with an hereditary visual impairment and spent the first seven years of my statutory education in special schools, first in a residential institution for 'blind' and 'deaf' children, and later in a segregated unit for partially sighted children. My father spent almost his entire working life in sheltered employment and my mother experienced mental illness resulting in her temporary hospitalization - shortly after I had been directed into residential school by the local education authority.

The first five months of 1990 were spent studying previous research on disability and accumulating data from a variety of secondary sources. In addition, I had a number of detailed discussions with several major figures within the disability movement in order to ascertain their views on how the project should proceed and what form it should take. These included Ken Davis (Derbyshire Coalition of Disabled People), John Evans (Hampshire Coalition of Disabled People and Chairman of BCODP), Vic Finkelstein (Open University), Rachel Hurst (Greenwich Association of Disabled People and Disabled People's International) and Philip Mason (Hampshire Coalition of Disabled People).

In May 1990 a detailed plan of the proposed document was produced. This was then circulated to each member of the advisory group and discussed in detail at an advisory group meeting held on 7 June. The proposal was accepted and the production of the document began.

In order to ensure accountability throughout the project, as each chapter was written a primary draft of it, accompanied by an invitation for comment, was submitted to the ten people mentioned above, Peter Large of the Disablement Income Group, and Linda Ward of the Joseph Rowntree Memorial Foundation. Subsequently, each draft along with any received comments were discussed thoroughly at monthly advisory group meetings before amendments were made.

BCODP's member organisations were constantly kept up to date on the project's progress via the literature normally circulated by the BCODP management committee. I also delivered verbal reports on research developments at each of the BCODP council meetings during 1990/1. The Committee of Voluntary Organizations for Anti-Discrimination Legislation (VODL) was also kept informed in the same way.

On 31 December 1990, a preliminary copy of the proposed document was sent to each of the above along with further invitation for comment. Amendments were made during March 1991, and the finished document was submitted for publication in April 1991.

Unlike previous studies of disability this book does not provide detailed case studies documenting the isolated experiences of individual disabled people. This was a conscious decision on the part of the research advisory group and myself. This is because such an approach tends to focus the reader's attention primarily upon individual disabled people, and not upon the discriminatory policies and institutionalised practices which create disability, the very opposite of what this book seeks to achieve.

After reading this book it might be argued that important areas within the context of disability have not been given the attention which they deserve. This is particularly pertinent with regard to the level of discrimination experienced by disabled members of the gay community, ethnic minorities, and women with impairments. Unfortunately this was unavoidable for two principal reasons. First, the general aim of the project was to establish conclusively that people with impairments experience discrimination every day of their lives - regardless of sexual preference: ethnic background or gender. Secondly, the research was

conducted at a point in time when a vast amount of information in the general area of disability was being produced which could not have been excluded from this analysis. This inevitably meant that some material had to be excluded.

I accept full responsibility for this and any other shortcomings which might be apparent in this document. However, I would hastily point out that this study should not be seen as a definitive statement on institutional discrimination against disabled people, but rather as a stimulus for other research in this hitherto neglected but crucially important area.

Acknowledgements

This book could not have been written without the enthusiasm, help and cooperation of all those mentioned above, as well as countless individuals currently involved in the struggle for disabled people's rights.

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