

Catching Buses

Published in Bristol Evening Post as 'A Life in Chains', 19 June 1999

I'm waiting at the bus stop on a cold and blustery day. Down a sweep of road comes a double-decker, lumbering towards us. It draws closer and I move into the road, into its path, arms out-stretched to greet it, until the bus roars and hisses to a stop. And round the base of the front wiper blade I slip a handcuff and clip the bracelet home. I have caught a bus. I turn to face the street and join the chants echoing from the buildings, "We will ride. We *will* ride."

We are told by the powers-that-be to wait another thirty years for a transport system that is accessible. Two more generations! And so when decades of letter writing, lobbying MPs and talking to transport operators fail to bring the results we need, we must turn up the heat.

We use non-violent direct action – handcuffing to buses, traffic stoppages, railway blockades and other tactics – to draw attention to our issue and win changes. We make a public spectacle of their shame.

Our demands are simple: we take action to demand universal access to public transport – that's buses, trains, trams, coaches and taxis that can be used efficiently, safely, independently and with dignity by *everyone*.

And we do it because someone's got to, because there's no time to lose, because change isn't won comfortably – and *because it works*.

When I go on an action I sometimes taste fear and, the night before, my stomach churns. For all the months of planning and recce and safety checks, there's still the unknown.

There's the man who tells us we're scum of the earth and the woman who thinks we should have been killed at birth. There are days when it's hard – fast moving, adapting to change, fielding abuse and waiting around for hours in the rain and chill.

And then there are moments - many moments - of exhilaration. A woman puts down her shopping bags to join us, others promise to write to their MPs, a group of kids asks to hand out leaflets and a bloke who saw us on yesterday's news comes down with his disabled daughter and her school friends.

It must seem to you that our sole aim is to make life difficult for everyone else, but your morning's inconvenience is, for us, a day-in day-out lifetime's exclusion. We break the smoothness of other people's routines so that we can drive the message home. And the message *is* getting there.

We chant until we're hoarse and we explain our purpose so many times it feels we must have converted a nation by now. "If you support us, go home, tell your friends and family, go to work, tell your colleagues, talk about us and talk about the issue."

I once read somewhere that it is not direct action that convinces the decision-makers so much as public opinion. Through direct action we shape that opinion and we point to solutions, but it's your response to us that wins the day.

How strange it is to see on the news and read in the press of the wheelchair warriors, the radicals and the militants. It's me and it's us! And it's not so much militancy as sheer, rock-bottom necessity. For all that it costs in time, money, health and arrests, doing nothing costs us all far more.

Because two and a half million people in the UK are being disabled by the transport systems – that's 2 _ million with their earning power reduced and their contribution to their communities restricted. And for every disabled person, there is a whole network of family, friends and colleagues held back.

And here in Bristol, you can wade through official statements of intent, policies and broken promises, but you still can't get on the bus. We live in a city that boasts of its international reputation as a "centre for progressive transport policies", but it's got just one accessible bus route, difficult access to trains and not a single accessible public coach.

Just think for a moment why *you* use transport – and where you would be without it. How would you get to work, earn a living, see friends, shop for your family, visit relations? Most of the activities outside your home and most of the activities within it are made possible by your access to transport. Your freedom, your sense of belonging and your everyday function depend on it.

For a whole century now, there has been public transport – except that it isn't actually *public*.

Travel to the United States, to Australia, Germany or to Scandinavia, and you'll find another story. They have proved that accessible transport works – some of them have had systems operating for *years* – and have found that, rather than being too expensive, transport operators' profits are up.

Back home, we are making progress. When we started direct action, the response to our demands from Government and the transport operators was predominantly "No way". Now, a decade later, we're on the verge of legislation that might allow us to end our transport actions. It's too soon to rest yet, but there will be a future when we can all travel freely.

DAN – the disabled people's Direct Action Network – can be reached on 0181-889 1361 (national) or (01275) 892 607 (Bristol group).