

THE POLITICS OF DISABILITY

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Mike Oliver
Avery Hill College

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1. Introduction

This paper will briefly consider the influence of the economy on the material circumstances of disabled people, the role of disability organisations in the articulation of political demands and some ways forward in the construction of a truly socialist policy relevant to meeting the needs of disabled people.

2. The Role of the Economy and the Influences of Traditional Political Activity

To begin with it is more than a mere truism to state that the fortunes of disabled people, as of everybody else, are closely bound up with the economy. It is not only people of left wing persuasion who recognise this significance for as Reg Prentice, formerly Minister for the Disabled, pointed out (RADAR 1980.30) when discussing services for the disabled.

"In the past the rate of growth had already been conditioned to some degree by economic circumstances."

In other words, goods and services for disabled people are dependent upon the size of the national cake.

It follows from this that in order to improve the material circumstances of disabled people, two possible though not mutually exclusive options are open. The first of these is to increase the size of the national cake whereby living standards improve for everybody, including disabled people. This may occur through what is usually called economic growth and Britain's economy has grown almost consistently over the past 250 years, though since the mid 1970's it has come to a halt. Whether this halt is temporary or permanent is subject to debate amongst economists and industrialists but the view taken here is that disabled people can no longer look to, improved services through economic growth. This leads on to the second option which is to increase the share of the economic surplus that is redistributed to meet the needs of the disabled population. This, of course, involves political activity through political parties, trade unions, pressure groups and so on, for in order to increase the share of one group, will inevitably mean that others have to take less.

There are a number of ways that disabled people can seek to effect changes in the material circumstances of their lives even within existing social structures. Obviously there are the traditional ones like by voting at local and general elections, by joining organisations like political parties, trade unions and the like, and by individually trying to influence events. None of these are likely to be very successful and certainly have not been so in the past because disability is too specific a problem for large political organisations and individuals lack sufficient power to make their voices heard.

Further, while in numerical terms, over 3 million disabled people constitute a potential political force of some importance, the likelihood of concerted and cohesive political action is remote. As Abrams and O'Brien (1981:19) point out in considering a similar question regarding the elderly

"The long-standing fear that, in order to further their own interests, the millions of elderly people in this country will form themselves into a powerful political pressure group has turned out to be empty."

They go on to list seven reasons why the fear of the elderly as a pressure group has turned out to be empty. It may be useful to adapt these briefly in order to discuss the potential (or lack of it) of disabled people becoming a significant political force.

To begin with there is a great deal of variety within the disabled population as a whole - differences in social class, age, sex, family circumstances and clinical conditions - as well as the fact that disability may have developed after political commitments had been established. In addition, many disabled people do not necessarily regard themselves as disabled, or even if they do, would not contemplate joining an organisation for disabled people. Finally, as a consequence of disability, some people may disengage from political activity, either because their physical impairment imposes limitations of a physical or a psychological kind, or because they are aware that in many contexts they lack any basis for exercising power, e.g. through the withdrawal of their labour.

What Abrams and O'Brien neglect in their discussion is any consideration of the relationship of the Government through its executive arm the State, with disabled people, through their representatives, a multitude of organisations of and for the disabled. These organisations

adopt a variety of different -approaches to the State and in what follows is our attempt to briefly discuss some of the main ones.

3. The Approaches of Disability Organisations

(a) The Partnership Approach

There are a number of dimensions to this. Some organisations like the Royal Association of Disability and Rehabilitation interweave with the organs of government through consultation, commenting on reports and proposed legislation and organising conferences. Others, like the Spastics Society, the Cheshire Homes and the like, provide similar services like day care, residential accommodation and social work support, to statutory ones but liaise with Government in order not to duplicate or overlap. Yet others, like the Joint Committee on Mobility, which is itself an umbrella organisation, provide a forum whereby Government can monitor existing provision and test out its ideas for future policies.

(b) The Income Approach

This equates problems of disability with those of poverty and suggests that a National Disability Income would ultimately solve the problem. There are two major organisations who pursue this particular approach; The Disablement Income Group and the Disability Alliance which is a loose federation of a number of groups. It would be wrong to suggest, however, that these organisations represent a co-ordinated approach, for there are very real differences between them. The Disablement Income Group is avowedly non-party political and has members of all parties amongst its honorary officers. The Disability Alliance, on the other hand, is closely allied to the 'poverty lobby' stemming from left of centre organisations like the Labour Party, the Fabian Society and the Child Poverty Action Group. The plans of the two groups for a National Disability Income also differ considerably.

(c) The Self-Help Approach

Some groups like the Spinal Injuries Association and the Association of Disabled Professionals, while not overtly political, are nevertheless in the business of attempting to change things for the better for their members. They attempt to do this by making their collective knowledge available to the whole membership, whether such knowledge be about self-care in

respect of particular disabling conditions or about the possibilities of professional employment.

(d) The Populist Approach

This is characteristic of organisations like the National Federation of the Blind, the National Union of the Deaf and the Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation. These groups argue that disabled people must work out their own collective solutions to problems of their membership and they must do this through democratic organisations of disabled people. UPIAS (1975) strongly condemns the current situation amongst disability organisations because

"The majority of physically impaired people are not drawn into the struggle but encouraged to become increasingly dependent upon those who struggle on their behalf "

Obviously these approaches do not exactly fit the activities of all organisations and they are also therefore, a model or ideal type, developed to draw out to some of the underlying processes involved. Additionally they look at the relationship between government and organised groups and the nature of this relationship is often problematic and difficult to determine. Most importantly, none of these approaches is likely to produce significant changes in the material circumstances of disabled people, at least in the foreseeable future. That is not, of course, to say that as approaches in themselves they are not worth pursuing, for clearly there are gains to be made: gains to be made in improving co-ordination between the statutory and voluntary sectors, in securing increases in rates of existing benefits and minor extensions in them, in re-orienting professional practice and placing more responsibility for control over their lives upon disabled people and finally in raising the consciousness and confidence of disabled people within society.

However, the basic point is that within the current economic situation such gains are likely to be small scale and we are unlikely to see radical changes in the material and social circumstances of disabled people. This is not only because of the limitations in the approaches discussed above, but also because there is, in addition, a second aspect of this relationship between disabled people and the State, and that concerns the way the State responds to such approaches. In order to discuss this fully, one needs to develop a theory of the State which goes beyond the idea of it simply responding in a neutral manner to a variety of competing

needs and demands and unfortunately there is not sufficient space to do that here. So here it will merely be suggested that in responding to the different approaches mentioned above, the State provides services in such a way to foster divisions within the disabled population as a whole rather than to cement alliances. For example, tax allowances for the blind but not other categories of disability, mobility allowances for those who cannot walk but not for those who can, higher pensions for those injured at work or in the services and so on. The State adopts this tactic in dealing with other groups also -differential treatment of groups within an overall class may facilitate a 'decomposition of that class'.

The State operates in this way in order to mediate between the competing demands of a variety of groups in 'need' and to allocate resources in such a way that is politically acceptable to a wide variety of different interests. Whether in this way the State is ultimately acting in the interests of one or a small number of interests or rather attempting in a neutral way to maintain a reasonable balance of interests is again a question beyond the scope of this paper. Whatever the reason for it acting in this way, the net effect of disabled people is to reduce, or at least keep in check, their demand for more resources to be allocated to meet their particular needs.

In briefly considering the political economy of disability in this section the focus has been on the possibility of improving the material circumstances of disabled people and on the relationship of disability organisations to the State. The conclusions from this are fairly pessimistic in that it is unlikely that disabled people will be better off as a consequence of economic changes either through growth or redistribution or that through the political process, the disabled population as a single minority group will succeed in articulating their demands successfully. Where then does this leave us for the future?

4. Towards the Construction of a Socialist Policy

In advancing some suggestions along these lines, it should be made clear at the outset that not all of these fall exclusively within the province of socialist policy but receive support from disabled people across the political spectrum. In addition specific mention of particular organisations does not imply that they are socialist and it is important to avoid the kind of misrepresentation and distortion that occurred recently in a speech given by a disabled person (Goldsmith 1982)

"I am not enthused by the performance of the British Council of Organisations of Disabled People; I do not buy the Marxist view of the world, which tells us that disabled people are not handicapped by their own disabilities, but by our socially oppressive capitalist culture."

The organisation referred to is clearly not Marxist and such attacks can only foster the divisions referred to earlier. It is particularly unfortunate also when the attack was made by an employee of the State and one who has not suffered the real material deprivation suffered by many disabled people, as recently documented by Townsend (1979).

In constructing a socialist policy towards disabled people, traditional approaches from the left need to be placed in appropriate context. Certainly, the Labour Party when in power has made significant improvements in the material circumstances of disabled people but criticisms of their social policy generally can also be made of their programme for disabled people. Walker(1982) has recently pointed out that on the Left social policy has always been subservient to economic policy and in addition, social policy has generally been imposed from the top down rather than built from the bottom up. It can be seen that these criticisms apply to the main piece of legislation introduced by the Labour Party for disabled people, the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act. Certainly the Act, through the insertion of the clause "where practicable and reasonable" has meant that implementation has been subject to the vagaries of economic circumstances. Not only that but control over the services provided under the Act rest squarely on professionals and while some liberal commentators have described it as nothing less than a "Charter for the Disabled" (Topliss and Gould 1981) it has in reality been a "Chapter for Professionals".

However more recent attempts to construct a truly socialist policy have not got very far in considering the needs of certain minority groups except to note their 'unproductive' role in relation to the economy. Thus, as Phillipson (1982.160) has pointed out

"Marxists have, in general, failed to identify the broad outlines of a socialist social policy. Still less have they considered the position of specific groups such as the elderly and disabled within the context of socialism".

One thing is clear in constructing a socialist policy and that is that the traditional approach of channelling more resources through professionals is not the way forward for as Taylor (1981.96) has cogently argued

"What is clear, however, is that the traditional alliance of conventional social democracy with liberal-professionals has to be jettisoned: too much of liberal professional work has proven to be harassing and alienating to working-class experience, and too little of it has proved to be effective in solving the specific problems of the class."

As has already been suggested, this general criticism certainly accurately depicts the experiences of disabled people in recent years. A consequence of this has been a gradual shift away from the dominant social attitude of 'enlightened guardianship' and towards that of 'disabled power' (Dartington, Miller and Gwynne 1981).

Reflecting this shift, in recent years there has been a significant rise in the number of disability organisations run and controlled by disabled people themselves; organisations of disabled people rather than organisations for disabled people. Again this distinction can be placed in appropriate context when considering the four approaches of the voluntary sector to the state discussed earlier; the partnership approach based on enlightened guardianship is gradually being rejected, by many disabled people at least, in favour of self-help or populist approaches based on disabled power.

However, what is being described is a movement which is at present in its infancy for as Large (1981.6) has noted.

"Organisations for the disabled outnumber organisations of disabled people by 100 to 1 and disabled people are missing from the governing bodies of the former and from their workforces. Moreover, organisations for the disabled - which proudly represent the interests of disabled people to government - and are used and supported by government for this purpose - often lack direct contact with disabled people, and are often very inadequately accountable to them".

Despite this current imbalance, the 1980's have seen two very important events in the growth of organisations of disabled people; the formation of the British Council of Organisations of Disabled People and the Disabled Persons International which organised its first World Congress in 1981.

In order not to repeat the mistakes of earlier attempts to construct a truly socialist policy, it is essential that policy makers work with such representative groups, who mayor may not themselves be socialist. In this way social policy can be built from the bottom up and in the longer term, the social democrat - liberal professional stranglehold on the provision of welfare can be broken. Whatever else has emerged out of recent socialist discussions, these two elements are an essential pre-requisite to the building of a truly socialist social policy.

5. Conclusions

In the short-term, any improvements in the material and social circumstances of disabled people are inevitably going to be closely tied to the performance of the economy. Therefore due to the unlikelihood of a significant economic upturn and also the lack of coherent political force to articulate the demands of disabled people, any gains are likely to be small-scale and piecemeal. In fact the real problem in the short-term may well be to defend what has already been gained rather than attempt to achieve any real or significant improvements. Those working within the politics of disability will already know that, in fact, this has been the major pre-occupation in recent years.

However, this pessimistic short-term conclusion can be set against optimism for the medium or longer term. Optimism in the sense that disabled people, through their own organisations are beginning to articulate political demands based on their own experiences, and this growth in the numbers, power and cohesion of organisations of disabled people is likely to continue throughout the next decade. Optimism further, in that many of the things being said by disabled people are being said by other groups and their own specific circumstances. Optimism finally, in that many of these things are essential pre-requisites to the construction of a truly socialist social policy which will not see the needs of disabled people, and other minority groups, as subservient to the needs of economic policy, but rather will base provision upon the needs of all people based upon their own articulations of what these needs really are.

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