

Response

TOM SHAKESPEARE

*(First published in **Coalition**, August 1996: 36)*

Vic Finkelstein has made another highly significant intervention in the disability debate: I would like to suggest that his alarm at the current direction of disability studies, and indeed the wider disability movement is slightly misplaced. Setbacks there have undoubtedly been, as in any political struggle, but there are many signs of a sea-change in the social responses to disablement, and in the lives of disabled people.

Vic is concerned that a focus on the experiences of disabled people - including the experiences of health and impairment - is distracting from, and diluting, the social model of disability. I do not think this is the case. I believe it is vital to identify disabling barriers, and work towards their removal. But it is also necessary for us, as disabled people to share our experiences and develop accounts of our lives. The excellent coverage of issues around sex and relationships in the last issue of *Coalition* demonstrates the importance of this: after all, "the personal is political".

This suggests a distinction between the disabling barriers area - which I think non-disabled people have a role in exploring (just as men can work to dismantle sexism and patriarchy) - and the area of disabled people's experience, which I believe should be the work of disabled people ourselves to study. We, after all, are the experts on our own lives, as the disability movement has always stated.

Finally, I welcome the broadening of debates within disability studies. It is healthy to have disagreement and intellectual argument, among people who are committed to the disability movement and the liberation of all disabled people. The danger comes when we 'wash our dirty linen in public' or reduce things to personal disagreement and acrimony. Pluralism is the mark of a healthy and mature movement: diversity is to be welcomed, while division is to be avoided.