

Welcome Address

(Speech Given at the Launch of the Poole Rights Organisation on Disability, 6/12/02)

Allan Sutherland

I am delighted to be welcoming a new organisation of disabled people. Over the last twenty-five years, I have seen a lot of change for disabled people, and it has come about as a result of us working together to change our lives, to change the lives of other disabled people and to transform the society in which we live.

In 1980, when I wrote my first book, 'Disabled We Stand', disabled people were far less visible than they are today. It was unusual to see a disabled person on the street. The reasons for that were simple. There were very few ramped kerbs; taxis, buses and trains were not wheelchair accessible; disabled people tended not to have jobs - because they couldn't get to them, because they didn't have access to the equipment that would enable them to work, because discrimination in education meant they weren't qualified or because they were excluded from work by discriminatory employment practices.

Not having jobs, they didn't have anywhere to go, and couldn't afford to even if they did. If they were lucky, they might have a blue invalid tricycle. As those only held one person, they didn't allow for much of a social life. And wherever disabled people went, they couldn't stay very long, because accessible toilets in public places were unheard of.

Many disabled people lived in segregated institutions, shut away where they could be easily forgotten about. As for people like me, with epilepsy, they kept quiet about it; it was the kind of thing that you could lose a job over. I have one of the most common disabilities there is, and yet, from the time I was first diagnosed epileptic to the time I first met someone I knew to have my disability it was twenty-six years. So when I first started performing, getting up on a stage and doing stand-up or performing poems about being epileptic, it was partly because I wanted other people with my own disability to see

that they were not alone in the world.

If you want to know what things were like back then, all you need to do is cross the Channel. I went for a week in Paris with my partner, who's a wheelchair user. (She's also an access consultant, so if any you have buildings you need made accessible, speak to me later.) The only other wheelchair users we saw in the streets were other tourists. And in the whole week, the only decent accessible toilet we found was halfway up the Eiffel Tower.

The major reason that things are now different in this country is that disabled people have organised and come together to work for change.

In the early eighties that meant organisations such as the Liberation Network of Disabled People, of which I was one of the founders, and the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation, who were doing the theoretical work that led to what we now know as the Social Model of disability. The British Council of Organisations of Disabled People was formed at this time - the first national voice for all the organisations of rather than for disabled people.

The Network and the Union came together to demonstrate against the presence of a South African team at the Stoke Mandeville games. That was quite a shocking event at the time - disabled people acting politically on an international issue like apartheid. The Daily Mail published several articles violently attacking the lefty agitators who were spoiling the poor cripples' fun - without actually mentioning that we were disabled too.

'Disability activist' was not a familiar concept then - not even, really, to us. We were working it out as we went. But it started to become more and more familiar. The Campaign for Accessible Transport attracted a great deal of notice when its members did things like sitting down in front of an inaccessible bus on Oxford Street. The resulting traffic jam brought the entire West End of London to a standstill.

A major milestone was the two Telethon demonstrations in 1991 and 1992. The Thames Telethon was a dinosaur of an event, a relic of

the past, raising money for good causes with the most incredibly patronising representations of disability. 'Help us help the poor cripples' was the basic tone. It was obviously naff. But it was 'for the disabled'. People in the media held back from attacking it; who'd be so low as to attack an event that did so much good.

It was a case of what the Italian communist Gramsci referred to as hegemony - power being maintained by a dominant ideology, an unchallenged set of beliefs. The idea that disabled people needed charity, that it was a good way of providing solutions to our needs, was at the very centre of Telethon.

We broke that hegemony. For two years running we stood outside the Thames studios, with speeches and performance - music, comedy, poetry. Disability politics and disability arts came together to create an astonishing event. And we broadcast the message: this does not represent us. We didn't ask for it and we don't want it. We haven't been consulted and it doesn't meet our needs.

It was at these demonstrations that some of our movement's most famous slogans first appeared. Slogans like 'Rights not Charity' and 'Piss on Pity'.

One year, to dramatise what Telethon was doing to us, we dressed up as beggars - with signs saying 'Blind', 'Epileptic', 'Deaf', trays of matches for sale and begging bowls. We put out a press release about it and got huge coverage.

The press loved it. We were giving them permission to tell the truth about Telethon. And providing good photos to go with it. A surprising number of journalists just came to cover Telethon generally, but realised that the story outside was a lot more interesting than the one inside.

And one of my happiest memories is of a point when some D-list celebrity was trying to get their car out and a lot of people had blocked the road. Police started to try to clear them. Tracy Booth, the organiser of the Campaign for Accessible Transport, a woman well used to blocking roads, got out of her wheelchair so they couldn't wheel her away. Two policemen moved in to lift her. One grabbed

her arms and the other grabbed her legs, in classic style. Only Tracy has artificial legs. The two policemen lifted - and Tracy's legs came off in a policeman's hands.

But the major issue over the years, the really big one, has been civil rights. We worked and worked and worked to win for disabled people the same sort of rights that already existed around race and sex. (Incidentally, as long as it was legal to discriminate on the grounds of disability, disabled people really had no protection under other legislation. A racist manager wasn't allowed to sack a black worker because of this colour. But he was allowed to sack him because he had an artificial leg, or wore a hearing aid, so it didn't make a lot of difference.)

There were a number of attempts to bring in private members bills during the Thatcher government. One of them was talked out by an MP who had MS, presumably put up to it on the theory that his disability would save him from attack. He lost his seat at the next election, and we liked to think he'd been voted out by the disabled people in his Bristol constituency. When he was put up as the Tory candidate in the Christchurch by-election, we came down and spent a day demonstrating, following him around, interrupting meetings and giving interviews to the press about what he had done to us. I am glad to say that he lost.

We won that war when radical disability activists made common cause with the big disability charities and created 'Rights Now!' an extremely successful lobbying campaign. Mencap printed a large number of red postcards, backing the demand for legislation and supporting the private members bill being put through parliament by Roger Berry.

During our mass lobby of the House of Commons, I spoke to an MP. He said, 'Usually, if you get two or three letters on a subject, that shows it's important. But with this, in every post, there'd be all these red cards. You couldn't miss them. And when I went into other people's offices, their post would be full of red cards too. I'd never seen anything like it.'

That kind of public feeling - and the willingness to act on it that the

cards were demonstrating - is the sort of thing that wins or loses elections. At that point, the Disability Discrimination Act started to become reality. Politicians realised that they could not ignore the issue.

We've got the tool for change we always wanted. The DDA isn't everything we'd have liked, but it is still a very important tool. Now it's up to you to use it. By forming this organisation, coming together as disabled people, you're doing exactly the right thing.

I do hope that in doing so, you will remember the disability arts movement - I know you have a local disability arts forum - and work with them, not fall into the trap of assuming that disability artists are somehow not serious about disability issues or not an important part of the struggle. So, as a working artist, I'd like to end this with a poem.

BITE THE HAND THAT FEEDS YOU

Frank is a nice boy
He never makes a fuss
Frank spends all his time at home
He can't get on the bus

Bite the hand that feeds you
Make the bugger bleed
Then maybe they'll notice you
And ask you what you need.

Terry can't stand cripples
They fill him full of fear
But raising money on their behalf
Is good for his career

Bite the hand that feeds you
Make the bugger bleed
He doesn't care a toss for you
He does it out of greed

If tugging at your forelock
Is making no impression
Don't think that Lady Bountiful
Will counter your oppression

Bite the hand that feeds you
Make the bugger bleed
You don't get rights without a fight
So fight for what you need

Happy fighting!

Allan Sutherland
6/12/02