

## Signs of Success

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*(This is a late draft of an article that appeared in GMCDP'S Coalition Magazine November 200).*

Are the big charities such as SCOPE, MENCAP, RNID, RNID successful? I would say yes they are successful at what they do. They are successful at getting bigger, meeting fundraisers criteria to get the money, hob nobbing with the rich and famous, boasting their own success, producing documents that do not change the imbalance of power and control in this non-disabled world of ours.

Are the big charities accountable? They claim to be highly accountable they have disabled people on their boards – sometimes more than 51%, they publish documents and newsheets so people know what they are doing. Do they make public the criticisms of disabled people? Well Scope's latest annual report does.

Do the big charities use appropriate language? They think so because they will say they have a lot of respect for their 'users', their 'carers' and they actively promote 'care'.

So how are our organisations different? Well we have principles based on representation. So unlike the big charities this is not just tokenism whereby a few disabled people appear to take part and have a real say in what is to be done; whilst it is people behind the scenes, away from scrutiny, that are making decisions yet using the name of disabled people. We can rest assured that it is elected disabled people who set the priorities and control in our organisations.

No chances of them being there to merely create the impression that they are in a position of control whilst the reality is they are expected to simply agree decisions made elsewhere. We make sure that in our organisation's

representatives from the membership are in control, are accountable to the membership and we will not allow any cliques or self interested networks to tell the membership what our organisations will do.

In turn, unlike the big charities, our organisations will challenge the establishment, it's oppressive language, the professionals who defend their right to make their careers out of our lives because (as they tell us) they know best.

No, our organisations would never sell out like that.

So that's alright then.

This article is appearing on the anniversary of the "Where have all the Activists Gone? Part 1" August 2000 edition of Coalition. I wrote an article about how the big charities are taking over service delivery from Local Authorities. I pointed out that whilst we all know only too well the problems with Local Authorities there is at least a glimmer of some accountability there.

I wrote of my concerns about how this return to charities is affecting us. Articles in that same issue by Anne Rae, Vic Finkelstein and Penny Germon where they talked about things that are happening in our own organisations have recently come back to my mind.

I am troubled that it seems to me that the principles on which charities build and claim success are not that dissimilar to things that are happening in some of, or parts of, our own organisations.

In that 2000 edition of Coalition (page 12) Vic Finkelstien wrote about the importance of "A movements" strategy and tactics adapted in changing economic contexts". I think the changed economic context of the past five years or so has influenced the way the emancipatory movement is operating. Some are using the new systems to develop new approaches to make best use of the opportunities whilst compromising on principles. Others want to keep

the principles even if it means missing out on funding and making networks in high places.

Our definition of what is successful needs to be different to that of the big charities. Are we successful if we have built a relationship with parliamentarians and civil servants? Some would say yes that is a sign of success. But could this perceived success be at the expense of our emancipation. I think it may be.

Our organisations struggle for funding in a setting where the funders determine what organisations have to do in order to get money. We have to decide whether we go for money for the sake of it and do the funders bidding; or whether to leave the money and devote our efforts to getting done what we know is important.

It is vital that our movement does not end up accommodating replications of the big charities. We have to ensure that elected representatives from the membership not only have the right to know what is going on but have the right to have questions answered, be given clarification and most importantly have an absolute right to sometimes disagree with and say "no" to what may have been done in our name.

It is not enough to say how we want our organisations and professionals to operate and then grumble if it does not happen. We have to make sure it happens, and that is difficult especially if it means we have to confront disabled people who resent having to ensure the properly elected representatives are appropriately involved and informed.

I remember that Anne Rae warned against "being seduced by the glamour of tokenistic inclusion around the consultation tables stuffed by the great and the good".

We have to be vigilant to avoid a cosy set up of unelected cliques and networks which, whilst making best use of the structures of the emancipatory movement, operate to further a limited set of interests. I agree with Vic

Finkelstein when he wrote in the same Coalition, "While the elite's exciting hobnobbing with the rich and famous is enabled by its flirtation with the emancipatory struggle the grass roots faces unending hardship in a world designed for the able-bodied living."

I believe this is linked into Anne Rae's article (page 5) when she talked about those "who seem so much more articulate and knowledgeable than we are .....", and how hard it is to challenge them.

But challenge them we must because our deference is taken as approval that we will be reminded of if we object at a later date. We must ask questions of and challenge what is being done in our name with little more than what Vic describes as a "flirtation with the emancipatory struggle".

Or we might as well say we are prepared to passively and unquestioningly take responsibility for our own uninformed decisions. If we do not insist on our elected representatives being properly informed in our own organisations then we can easily be directed by unelected disabled people who insist we should trust them because we do not understand the issues and they know better than we do. Now where have I heard that before?

In August 2000 Penny Germon warned that our organisations and solidarity, the foundations of our movement, are fragmenting. Could this have something to do with the clamour for official approval and meeting funding criteria?

I also believe that we have to be attentive that our organisations act in a way that counteracts disadvantages in society. It remains much easier for white, middle class disabled people living in areas of high employment to overcome barriers. They have a choice they could use their resources to offer themselves to help redistribute advantage and access to support systems fairly throughout the movement and the UK as a whole. Or they

could choose to further improve their own situation because they are well placed to please the establishment and make best use of the emancipatory movement at the same time.

At GMCDP's 2001 AGM Vic talked about having our own Professionals Allied to the Community, which I think is a great idea. But having them is not enough we still have to be wary if these professionals are to truly be ours. There are already signs that they could merely become a mirror image of non-disabled professionals, resisting influence and control by those in the emancipatory struggle. Some already see themselves as the experts, control their own support network of agreeable disabled people and dismiss those elected representatives of the emancipatory struggle as a bunch of interfering amateurs.

Allowing this to happen jeopardises our movement and the principles of representation and emancipation. We can never be complacent - our organisations are not automatically safe just because they are in the hands of disabled people (or "user controlled" as some might say!).