‘Rights or charity, the future of welfare’

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The following article is adapted from a talk given by Ken Davis organized by the Derbyshire Coalition of Disabled People and the Centre for Social Action which took place in October 1993.

# Time for change

As most of us know, the welfare state has been vandalised by the political right for well over a decade. The walls of social solidarity which surround it have been sprayed with Thatcherite graffiti telling us how mollycoddled we've all been, and how we should be hoiking ourselves up by our own bootstraps, casting off our calipers, getting on our bikes and peddling off towards the promised land of freedom and enterprise. Its foundations of collective responsibility have been systematically undermined and we're all being brainwashed into believing that welfare is something the nation can no longer afford.

Politicians, academics and assorted intellectuals of all kinds are debating its future, and most of it is going on over the heads of those who have been forced to turn to welfare most. Among these are the disabled members of Britain's underclass. It's time we joined in and started to tell these people what life is life down below the grassroots.

To a large extent, our own Coalition members have sorted out in their own minds where they stand on this debate about the future of welfare. The negative, out-of-date able-bodied ideas about disability have been binned and recycled to make sense with our own direct experience. This has led us to challenge the role of things like charity in our lives; it has also meant exposing the ugly features of social control that lie just underneath the caked make-up of benevolent, paternalism which has been plastered on the face of welfare.

We are no longer prepared to be side-lined, marginalized and treated as second-class citizens. We are out on the streets in increasing numbers, demanding rights, and we mean it. Already, many of us have been brought before the courts, risked imprisonment, and felt the less than benevolent arm of the law in direct action campaigns. And this will grow. We have been forced into a fight for civil rights and anti-discrimination legislation. What this means is that welfare paternalism has to go. It has to be re-framed in the context of citizenship rights.

But of course, while all this has been going on, the right-wing campaign against what they call the tide of socialism, has been pursued relentlessly. They are putting their bovver boots into the so-called 'dependency culture' and head-butting the 'nanny state'. Currently, they are preparing the system of universal benefits for the coup de grace. When they think they've got the welfare state finally out of the way, individualism and the nearly free but extremely unfair market will have been restored. The human miseries which are the universal fall-out of the so-called free market will, instead of falling on state welfare, fall mainly on The Family, backed up by a rejuvenated role for charity.

In this great right-wing cause, public spending is being chopped to provide tax cuts to fill the pockets of healthy, enterprising individuals who will then have loadzamunny to provide for themselves and in turn look after their own. In their version of Utopia, the State's role will be reduced to a remnant, where last resort supplicants no longer "live in luxury" off the backs of hard-working taxpayers, but at a means-tested level which makes dead certain that benefits do not act as a disincentive to work, however, low the pay and however bad the malnutrition.

In the middle of this right-wing rush to return to good old Victorian values, disabled people are struggling to get our voice heard. Sometimes our demand for rights not charity gets wrapped up with the slogans if not the intentions of the political right wing. "Independence, choice and control" are words which echo round the movement, and we can ourselves rant about 'dependency creating services' with all the fervour of an evangelical Tory, though for very different reasons, and with very different outcomes in mind.

At the heart of what is sometimes a scenario for mixed political messages, the point is that disabled people are demanding the wherewithal and the practical arrangements needed to make equal citizenship a reality. As far as services are concerned, those of us who have been involved in CIL's, the use of direct payments in self-directed personal assistance schemes, and the development of co-op's like Interhelp and other initiatives, have been showing the way towards the kind of welfare we say we want in the future. And it is a far cry from the paternalistic guff which has been and is dished up for us by the "caring professionals"

Our initiatives depend not on destroying the idea of social solidarity, but on a firm collective commitment to provide the means by which new forms of welfare can emerge. It is this collective commitment that enables us to disentangle the aims and aspirations of disabled people from the rabid salivations of the political right wing. Disabled people who have been turned by lack of equal opportunities into passive dependents of paternalistic welfare, have very few problems with getting rid of unnecessary nannies or dependency-creating welfare.

The central aim of disabled people in relation to welfare is not that of "reducing the tax burden" or "targeting the most needy", but of reducing the burden of oppression and targeting discrimination. If disabled people have a quarrel with welfare, it is not with the idea of collective provision but with the facts of discrimination and segregation that the welfare system has done much to serve and perpetuate.

# Roots of State Charity

It is this segregation and discrimination which our organizations are calling down the curtain on, and have been for some years. The Union of the Physically Impaired against Segregation once said that, while ever we can't get on with our lives, earn a living and make a contribution because of the way society is organized, welfare is little more than a form of state charity. And as we all know, charity is something that can be given or not, depending on which way the fiscal wind is blowing. As for state charity, and as we can see from the attitude of the Government, what has been given can all too easily be taken away.

Nowadays we are saying this is not good enough. Using charity, state or private, as a way of securing the fundamentals of life for disabled people is not acceptable, it is a political disgrace. The demand is for welfare entitlements which recognise our full and equal citizenship rights, based on laws which secure freedom from discrimination and civil rights. It is no longer a case of begging or going cap in hand, requesting permission to feed at the able­ bodied table. Disabled people are pointing out that we pay rates, taxes, dues and demands in, much the same way as everyone else. Accordingly, we expect similar results.

To find out what went wrong with old-style welfare, we've had to dig down deep to uncover some of its buried intentions. Baron Beveridge’s stated aim for the welfare state was to free the nation from the “five giants” of want: disease, ignorance, squalor, and idleness. On the face of it, looks like a major social advance and in many ways it was. But if it was intended, however gradually or indirectly, to bring about equality and freedom from discrimination for disabled people, it certainly has not had that effect. In many ways, it appears more like a device to protect privilege and limit social change.

Some other clues, if we need any, that lead us towards a similar conclusion can be found in the political reasons sometimes given to justify some of the earlier social provisions which led up to the Welfare State. For instance, the Tory Premier, Balfour, once said that socialist changes would never come about if this Government was prepared to put society on a proper and more solid basis. Lloyd George once said that, by concealing the real causes of poverty, his first national insurance ·scheme in 1911 was the capitalist way to avoid even bigger changes in the organization of society.

For some at least, welfare was a useful political expedient to protect vested interest by way of keeping the lid on social unrest. When we look back a bit further, we can see this has a much longer pedigree. There's not a lot of doubt that State intervention in the lives of disabled people - the "impotent poor" as we used to be called - came about through action to try to cure or curb vagrancy and begging, which was a major problem in the mid-fourteenth century.

The situation just over the Derbyshire hills, in Cheshire, illustrates the point. By 1539, Henry Gee, the Mayor of Chester, had got so fed up with the number of what he called "valiant and idle persons and vagabonds" whose persistent begging was cleaning alms­ givers out of their spare cash, patience and goodwill, he ordered lists of licensed local disabled and other beggars to be displayed in. every house, on a ward by ward basis. If your name wasn't on the list, you were supposed to be given the boot.

Anyone giving alms to someone, not on the list was fined 12 pence, and the vagrants put in the stocks. Of course, it didn't stop begging, it only moved the vagrant beggars over to some­ one else's backyard. Eventually, as a matter of political expediency, parishes were given powers to raise taxes for poor relief, to try to re­ move the deserving poor - which included us impotent disabled need I say it - from the picture, and isolate the undeserving beggars.

By 1601, this had turned into the compulsory secular, nation-wide system of poor relief. It required parishes to survey, keep registers, and provide and charge for accommodation for disabled people and others with no other means of support. It established the familiar paternalistic, administrative approach to disability, which views it then as now as an individual problem requiring paid officials to define, classify, register, manage and control.

In practice, this meant that if you couldn't survive on able-bodied terms, on your own or with the support of your family, you were means-tested and dumped in some segregated facility or other. Many of us have found from bitter experience that few of the essential features of this have changed in the intervening 400 years.

# More of the same

The arrival of the welfare state towards the end of World War 2, clearly extended the principle of collective provision for individual need and, until the last ten years or so, made the idea seem virtu­ ally fire-proof. It has benefited disabled people in many ways compared with times gone by. It has raised awareness and expectations which have led to further pressure for change. It has attracted workers who themselves struggle for improvements, and some of them support the kind of changes we’re looking for.

Nevertheless, the administrative approach to disability, with its ancient tradition of segregating us from wider society, still permeates the welfare structure. For instance, Beveridge’s giant of ignorance was supposed to be educated out of existence in State supported schools, but for disabled children it turned out to be the largely inferior variety dished up in special schools. Idleness was to be dealt with through "full" employment, but for us it was in segregated sheltered workshops, enclaves and a toothless Quota system.

Disease was the province of the NHS, but many of us still find ourselves dealt with as lifetime patients in segregated "young disabled units". Want was to be dealt with through social security, but for many disabled people, this has been an inadequate "sick or fit" system locking us into the poverty trap, topped up by special allowances designed to compensate us for the extra costs of living in a hostile society.

Squalor was to be got rid of through environmental improvements, better housing and so on. But for us, where and how we live has meant suffering all the illogicality and hard­ ship caused by "special needs" housing policies, and more generally by a thousand and one barriers in the built environment. In some situations, it would be easier for a blue-blooded British explorer to stick the Union Jack in the South Pole, than for a disabled person to stick a letter in their local post box.

And of course, where disabled people dropped through the welfare net, the successors to the magistrates, overseers and workhouse masters of the Old Poor Law - nowadays mas­ masquerading as "caring professionals" in Social Services Departments - administered the welfare provisions written into the 1948 National Assistance Act. On paper, this Act brought the era of the Poor Law finally to an end. In practice, those of us who have lived and died in the segregated institutions provided under Part 111 of the Act, have merely been re-enacting year in, year out the sad tragedy scripted for us in the 43rd Act of Elizabeth I in 1601. Down all these years, we and our family members have been means tested and forced to pay accommodation charges for the privilege of being pronounced, in effect, socially dead.

Little wonder disabled people are demanding change. We know more perhaps than any other group, that the dramatic changes which often go hand in hand with disability, need a clear, cast-iron social commitment. We know that no-one can regard themselves immune from accident, disease or other cause of impairment. We know that the erosion of social solidarity and the current destruction of the welfare state is not simply putting disabled people at risk - it is also fundamentally against the self-interest of the temporarily able-bodied majority. It is the way welfare is applied in practice that is in question.

# Farming the disabled

Nevertheless, and as we might expect, the Government's approach to the latest welfare wheeze in the shape of "community care" is to ensure that it is implemented in a way that assists their dismemberment of the welfare state. Behind the seductive "community care" rhetoric about independence choice and control, disabled people are viewed as relatively powerless pawns in the larger political game of shifting the business of "caring" out of the hands of the local state into a mixed market place. In the process of creating a "mixed economy of care", it has stirred up a heady brew of politics, profit and professional power.

Some of the early outcomes of this potent concoction are enough to make even the most gullible proponents of "community care" stagger with disbelief. For example, 89% of those locally eligible for "care management" in the first few months of the current year were dumped in residential and nursing institutions. In practice, the Government's desire to shift the balance of "care", has meant shifting the bulk of taxpayer's money into the profit-hungry pockets of people who run private institutions, in order to appease NHS consultants who, want a secure, off-the-peg way to empty their beds as quick as they can turn patients over.

Even if the dream of a mixed economy does arrive in due course, in any event, it will be a sham, because the Government, the very apostles of market individualism, resist legislation which would give disabled people direct access to the cash which would turn us into direct instead of pseudo consumers of services. They wish to keep us in the role of eternal children, where grown-up service providers, who know what's best, purchase services on our behalf.

Without a broader view of disabled people’s social situation, the Government's dream of Community Care could, for us, turn into an Orwellian nightmare of a marketplace of mixed providers, all determined to win contracts from statutory purchasers to care for our needs, all working in competition, and all providing things that disabled people never asked for.

Like the private contractors who used to bid for tenders to provide services under the Old Poor Laws, sometimes per capita sometimes for a global sum, the pressure will be to cut bids to the bone, with all the usual results in terms of low wages for workers - likely to be women - and a bad service for those who have it inflicted upon them. This practice of 200 years used to be called ‘farming the poor’; soon it will be derided by us as ‘farming the disabled for profit.’

Once again, little wonder disabled people feel they have little choice but to build up a campaign for anti-discrimination legislation. The combination of the damaging idea of "care" and market forces will tend to add to the vested interest in our continued dependency unless there is a clearer understanding and will to do something about it.

# Support our democratic voice

One thing that can be done to counteract this is for greater support to be given to the disabled people's movement. Authorities can help to finance the self-organization of disabled people, as has happened for some years in the case of the County Council, NE Derbyshire and other Districts in Derbyshire. They can create structures through which we can influence decisions; in some matters they can offer training and expertise; they can open doors for our participation in planning, training, development and employment.

They can give a clear commitment to the democratically organized, representative voice of disabled people. Democratic self-organization helps the voice of disabled people to find common consent and clear expression. Even political parties which deny us basic rights claim the probity of this for themselves. It is the best way for disabled people to share and analyse the problems we encounter in daily life - free from the control and influence of professionals, parents, carers and sundry other able-bodied controllers of our lives

Groups whose rules put control in the hands of our elected representatives, offer authorities a valid substitute for the flawed second-hand professional perception of disability, which has led to so many second-rate services and helped produce so many second-class disabled citizens. Supporting such groups is also the way for representative disabled people to replace those articulate disabled consultants, who speak in our name, but who are elected by and accountable to no-one but themselves.

Greater support for our democratic voice will also help us develop a power bloc with sufficient political clout to resist the fascist right wing of medicine and politics, currently growing in strength and influence. Remembering the 200,000 or so disabled people systematically killed by Nazi doctors in my own lifetime, no one, disabled or temporarily able-bodied, can ignore the lethal combination of eugenics and fascism, now re-emerging in the benevolent guise of genetic research and the rise of nationalism and racism across Europe.

Disabled people can no longer afford to be organizationally weak and fragmented. We urgently need to be united and strong enough to influence the events which shape our lives and deaths. Recognition of this, and its tangible expression in terms of financial support, is something that can be offered more widely, not just at the local level but particularly in terms of a shift of Government support at the national level away from unrepresentative organizations to better funding for the British Council of Organizations of Disabled People.

Assisting this democratic process will in turn assist disabled people to make a more constructive input into, say, the Community Care consultation apparatus. It will help to strengthen support for the growth of more local CIL's, for direct payments and self-directed personal assistance and support schemes and a range of other facilities needed to give effect to the new welfare citizenship arrangements of the next century.

Ken Davis

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