**Service Brokerage**

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(Source **Coalition** October 1989)

Part One: Service Brokerage – the Movie

‘Service brokerage is a system of delivering services to disabled people which involves them directly in the process. It is not just about enabling – it is about empowering people, and giving them control over their lives’  
‘In a series of meetings around the UK, we are hoping that disabled people, relatives, carers and their representatives and staff involved in the delivery of services, will come together and plan how they can bring about this revolution.’  
(Good Impressions Publishing Ltd, May 1989)

It was one of those mixed-up dreams which, on the face of it, seem absurd. I was both watching and involved in a film of the disabled people’s movement interpreted in the form of a non-violent Spaghetti Western[[1]](#footnote-1). At frequent intervals, adverts were shown, reinforcing messages in the film, which urged people to get on the service brokerage bandwagon.

The production company was an obscure small business called “Good Impressions Publishing Ltd”, whose ownership was not known but appears to publish mainly the writings of David Brandon.

In the leading role, as a much feared ‘word-slinger’, was David Brandon, editor of **Community Living**, a qualified psychotherapist, the author of **Zen and the Art of Helping[[2]](#footnote-2)**, and co-author of **Putting People First – a Handbook on the Practical Application of Ordinary Living Principles[[3]](#footnote-3)**. He also has a training organisation called ‘Tao’ which offers courses on ‘Counselling People with Learning Difficulties’, ‘Consumers as Colleagues’, ‘Normalisation’, ‘Advocacy’, and ‘Coping with Stress’.

The two other starring roles were taken by Professor Nancy Marlett, of Calgary University in Canada[[4]](#footnote-4), who has a background of empowering people through information technology, and Noel Towe, a divisional director of Social Services in Oxfordshire.

The fact that it was a small budget production was given as the explanation why so few disabled people are actually seen on screen. Those who did appear had uncredited ‘bit parts’, except for those few parts which were, in every sense of the word, supporting roles.

The plot was a familiar one, but did have some unexpected twists.

The oppressed population (disabled people rather than peasants) had been ruled for some years by a dictatorship. This ruling elite had originally gained power by claiming to have special knowledge through which they would help the oppressed people. Over time, however, many of the ruling elite became complacent with their comfortable life and positions of power, whilst others took every opportunity to line their own pockets. Even so, the ruling elite continued to insist that they were doing their best to help, and constantly warned the oppressed people that life would be much harsher without them.

A few of the oppressed people had been persuaded to support the ruling elite, and in return they received constant flattery, positions on committees and awards of merit. Some even had well paid jobs purposefully created for them. But whilst all this made them feel good and superior to the rest of their people, they had no real influence to change things.

Some of the oppressed people were not fooled for long, however, by these promises of help, and set about developing their own solutions and forms of resistance. Initially they were small in numbers and had to struggle against great odds. But with time they grew in both numbers and confidence, to the extent that they believed in themselves and in their collective ability to change life for the better.

Then, without any warning, three strangers arrived in their land who went from town to town with a powerful message.

‘Follow us’ they said, ‘and we will bring about a revolution!’

‘We will cast aside the dictators and replace them with good people, who will give you control over your own lives. These good people shall be known as Service Brokers!’

Many strangers had visited this land before with lavish promises of help, so the oppressed people were wary of David, Nancy, and Noel, the new arrivals. But these strangers brought with them powerful new weapons, they had fine words that were so deeply flattering, they could produce states of confusion and doubt in their victims, even when communicated from long distances.

The twist in the story is that the oppressed people didn’t follow the strangers in bringing about their revolution (except for one or two who succumbed to flattery), but disenchanted sections of the ruling elite did.

There was a hazy and inconclusive end to this movie, with factions of the ruling elite engaged in a struggle for power and the oppressed people realising that the revolution is not about their emancipation, but about a different form of dictatorship!

Part Two: Service Brokerage – the Conference

(A conference to promote Service Brokerage, one of a series of such conferences, took place in Salford in May. GMCDP Executive Council member Ken Lumb attended)

There was a lot of literature accompanying this conference, which might be explained partly by the fact the organisers were ‘Good Impressions Publishing Ltd”. As well as the usual leaflets there was a booklet – **Free to Choose – an Introduction to Service Brokerage** – and **Service Brokerage**, a supplement to the magazine **Community Living**. It was glossy, costly, and all directed towards explaining the wonders of Service Brokerage.

Of note in this literature was the abundance of fine sounding words like ‘consumer’, ‘participation’, ‘choice’, ‘empowerment’, ‘de-professionalisation’, and ‘control’. These words are used to lace together arguments about the wastefulness and irrelevance of much service provision with the need for new forms of service delivery, incorporating a shift of power from service providers to consumers.

They say, for example, ‘Millions of pounds are spent on providing services for disabled people – much of it is wasted on services they do not need or want. More often than not, asking people what they want is just a token gesture – the answers are rarely acted upon’.

Wonderful stuff this, with obvious similarities to what disabled people and our organisation have been saying for many years. But when you scratch beneath the surface to look beyond the deeply flattering language, a number of contradictions emerge.

The impression given by the promoters of the campaign for service brokerage (David Brandon, Noel Towe and Nancy Marlett) is that they are progressive, gnawing away at the frontiers of social change, intent on empowering the consumer so as to bring about a revolution in services provision. The reality is somewhat different, however. In their literature and at the conference, they have shown a blatant disregard for their own fine words.

When David Brandon and Noel Towe choose to make disgraceful and damaging remarks about disabled people’s organisations (**Free to choose** p.35) without having any knowledge of our organisation, of our history, or of the immense efforts made by disabled people over many years to reach the stage we are now at, then what conclusions can we draw from this? We can only conclude that by ‘writing off’ disabled people’s organisations they are actually empowering themselves. They are removing an inconvenient obstacle in order to legitimate their own ambitions of ‘leading the way’.

But then, like most ambitious people, they get so carried away by their own project and opportunism that criticisms of our organisations are overlooked when circumstances require it. The proposal made by David Brandon to experiment with small-scale brokerage schemes in Centres for Integrated Living, without even bothering to consult with the CILs concerned, is a stark example of this kind of insensitive opportunism (See David Brandon’s ‘How Service Brokerage works’ in **Service Brokerage** Volume 1, Issue 1, April 1989).

What about the conference? Again the literature contain an abundance of fine words like ‘When consumers meet professionals, conferences need active consumer participation’. Moreover, an entire article was devoted to the issue of consumer participation. This made the point that ‘consumer involvement is often a token gesture by conference organisers. If power is to be equally shared, consumers’ voices must be heard and their suggestions acted upon’ (Martin Gaba in ‘When consumers meet professionals’ in **Service Brokerage** Volume 1, Issue 1, April 1989).

Once again, other evidence contradicted these fine words, to suggest that their approach to consumer involvement was also a token gesture. For example, there was not one scrap of access information amongst the literature, nor provisions such as creche, sign language interpreter, induction loop, papers in braille, enlarged print or on tape. A conference fee of £20 and a 9am start were other factors which would deter the involvement of disabled people.

Readers of **Coalition** will have gathered from this that the conference organisers could hardly have done better job to ensure the absence of disabled people at the conference if this had been their intention. Of course it wasn’t their intention, but this was precisely the outcome. The thirty-eight conference participants were listed under the categories of consumer, carer, and job title. Thirty-two of these had job titles (some from as far afield as Basingstoke, Birmingham, Powys and Clwyd), three were carers, and three consumers. There was little doubt in my mind who was being empowered by these conference arrangements – i.e. service providers!

What about the consumer voice which must be heard, then? Surely, this was an opportunity to let the service brokerage campaigners know just what we think about them. After all, ‘service brokerage requires professionals and those financially responsible for supplying services to LISTEN (their emphasis) to the disabled person, the consumer of the services and, therefore, the one individual who should be dictating what is supplied’ (conference leaflet). So the same principles should be applied by those who are providing service brokerage, shouldn’t they?

Well, for a start, THIS so-called consumer was required to listen for two and a half hours to the opinions voiced by Noel Towe (introduction), Nancy Marlett (on ‘Social change related to the empowerment of consumers’), David Brandon (on ‘Consumers as colleagues’) before there was a question time. Then in the discussion which followed (which tended to dwell on technical questions of service brokerage) it became evident that the absence of disabled people at the conference was not an issue to be addressed. Neither, it seemed, was the more fundamental issue of the absence of consultation with organisations of disabled people over the decision to campaign for service brokerage in the UK.

So I gathered together my consumer voice and started to raise these issues. But I hadn’t got very far when the so-called co-chair David Brandon leapt from his seat, strode down the aisle towards me and asked me to stop! He then asked for a detail to be clarified, which I did before carrying on. But almost immediately he interrupted again. This time he made an appealing gesture with his hands, before saying ‘Could I ask you to stop and have a word with me later?’! To say that I was astonished and angered by this behaviour is an understatement. My immediate response was to remind David Brandon that he had just spoken uninterrupted for sixty-five minutes and I intended to continue. In the event I was so angry I couldn’t remember what I was going to say, so I did stop.

The meeting deteriorated still further after this, and I had the distinct feeling that I was under attack. One service provider glared at me and shouted a variation of the ‘we are all disabled’ argument/ Remarkably, he included service providers amongst the categories of the disabled.

It needs to be mentioned that Noel Towe intervened to support and expand on some of my arguments but, by this time, I had a strong urge to leave. But such thoughts floundered when I learned that the public telephone was some distance away and even then there was no guarantee that I could get accessible transport. So there I remained, trapped for another few hours in the phoney role of consumer.

As a final comment on this conference, what better source than an extract from their own literature, which makes the point that: ‘Conference organisers must exercise positive discrimination to enable all aspects of the conference to be appropriate in an atmosphere of genuine and mutual respect. It is easy to be seduced by glib and tawdry imitations of partnership’.

Precisely!

1. Spaghetti Westerns (often also referred to as Italian Westerns, Eurowesterns, or Westerns all’Italia) were films set in the American ‘Wild West’ in the 18th and 19th Centuries, but filmed, directed, and written by Europeans. These types of Western were usually more moralistic than their American counterpart, and were often visibly much cheaper – using lower quality cameras, special effects, and production facilities – DPA Team [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Published by Routeledge in 1978 – DPA Team [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. No information about this particular ‘handbook’ has made its way online – DPA Team [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Marlett remains working at Calgary University at the time of writing, where she is currently director of the Community Rehabilitation and Disability Studies program – DPA Team [↑](#footnote-ref-4)