**Power to the Pedlars – the Art of Service Brokerage**

**Ken Davis**

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If you are physically impaired, watch out for the Service Brokers. They have been seen recently peddling their pet scheme ‘round the country. They look good, they sound good, and by Jingo, they’re determined to do good for you.

What’s it about? Well, a few people – including a couple of characters with a background in social work – are picking up on a scheme dreamed up by parents of kids who had previously been dumped in a mental handicap institution in Canada, parcelling it up all nice ‘n’ glitzy, then marketing it here in Britain.

And the original scheme? The Woodlands Parents Group thought that the money being spent to keep their kids in the local institution in Calgary should be spent on arrangements to lead independent lives in the community[[1]](#endnote-1). A bit like the thoughts of that old unrepentant nukeroo, surrogate parent and segregationist, Lenny Cheshire[[2]](#endnote-2) – but in reverse.

Their idea apparently has three angles to it: there’s a **broker**, whose job is a bit like a travel agent arranging flights to Independent Living Land; there’s a **Joshua Committee[[3]](#endnote-3)**, which helps you to overcome your fear of flying; and there’s **individualised funding**, which pays for the package.

I don’t know what the Calgary kids think about it, but I’m sure that people with learning difficulties within the Coalition will want to look at the idea against the background of their own direct experience. Physically impaired people are also looking under the glitz, to see what these pedlars are pushing.

One of them, David Brandon, made the amazing discovery in back in the ‘60s that social work can be a hindrance rather than a help, and wrote a book around it called **Zen and the Art of Helping[[4]](#endnote-4)**. The other, Noel Towe, works for Oxfordshire Social Services Department. Together, they are pushing a few variations of ‘service brokerage’, as it has come to be called.

In their booklet **Free to Choose**, they make it crystal clear exactly what they’re selling:

‘Brokerage is the technical arm of an autonomous planning mechanism that is community-based and consumer controlled’

Ok – now that little matter has been cleared up – I suppose that, as physically impaired people, we could hardly grumble about the basic idea – **unless, of course, we found we had been left out of the way the idea has been developed and put into practice**. And indeed, there is a notable deficiency in this respect. By this omission, the pedlars oblige us to look at their activities more closely, since their efforts seem to follow the same pattern as thousands of other wheezes that non-disabled people have foisted onto us in the past.

To be fair on David Brandon and Noel Towe, they do try to give the right impression. They use the right words in their glitzy literature – like ‘de-professionalisation’ and ‘empowerment’. Looks good, doesn’t it? **But they didn’t empower BCODP by consulting us first as to whether this scheme was likely to best secure our long-term interests!** Clearly they are also pedlars of empty words.

Anyone who feels unsure about the fairness of this criticism should also note whether they also wish to empower those who, by their own analysis, need empowerment most. Inside **Free to Choose** they say that groups of disabled people are mostly politically ineffective, that our lobbying ability is strictly limited, and that we fight and compete with each other.

If they really think that’s true, and if they really believe in ‘empowerment’, surely they should be working with us, helping to make us more effective, less limited, more cohesive. **Instead, in time honoured ‘professional’ fashion, they go right over the top of our heads, blurting out the current buzzwords ‘empowerment’ and ‘de-professionalisation’ as they go.**

But their criticism of our movement is unjustified and inept, as those of us who have struggled over the years to piece it together will know. Brandon and Towe are clearly not about empowering us, but about undermining our efforts to gain control over our lives.

Obviously, they have no real desire to be accountable to Britain’s democratic, representative voice of disabled people. Their empty words, their attack on our organisations, is little more than a device. **It’s a device designed to give the illusion of being progressive; a device designed to justify their intervention into our lives**. We’re not fit to do these things ourselves, so we need to have it done for us, by right-thinking advocates like them.

To complete this deception, they link CILs with their scheme, even though the Derbyshire Centre for Independent Living has had no formal approach from them – nor, as far as it is possible to tell, has any other CIL. So these pedlars are not only **abusing** us, they are also **using** us to give legitimacy to their marketing campaign.

So what is the purpose of all their activity? Since hey haven’t bothered to consult and involve our representative organisations, is it just because they think that service brokerage is good for us? Are they concerned on our behalf to influence the government’s thinking on community care; striking while the iron is hot? Are **they** advocating individualism because **they** think social solidarity is bad for us? Are they just making a name for themselves, jumping on the privatisation bandwagon as being the best option to advance their personal career paths?

One thing seems clear enough, they know that the best way of keeping us powerless is to ensure that we are fragmented and divided. So they discredit the effectiveness of our movement, and skip into the public eye with a scheme tailor-made to keep it that way. Service brokerage is an ideal vehicle for dealing with us as **individuals**. Good advocates (and despite their co-optation of CILs, they can’t be well organised disabled advocates, can they, since they claim we are organisationally ineffective) will work in such a way as to ensure that our personal, individual needs are satisfied. **Satisfied individuals will have no need, see no reason to develop a powerful collective voice through strong organisations of our own.**

So service brokerage will offer a new career path for a new breed of social worker. Thus, right at the heart of the matter, service brokerage is about **protectionism**. It is about protecting vested interests. It is about stifling and spoiling the emerging criticism by the disabled people’s movement of existing service systems. It recognises the pressures this will generate, and **service brokerage is a response which has all the trappings of progressiveness; all the slippery quality of an apparently positive response to our demand for control over our own lives – but one which ensures that control over disability policy stays exactly where it is at the moment: firmly in the hands of non-disabled people.**

Service brokerage is designed to divert attention away from our questions about the legitimate exercise of power. We are built out of society by a multitude of barriers. As a group, we are among the poorest of the poor in Britain. For these, and many other reasons, the direct experience of disabled people is chronically under-represented in the decision-making process.

As a result, successive waves of legislation reflect non-disabled perceptions, non-disabled interests. This able-bodied legislation gives duties and powers to central and local government departments which they would never have, had disabled people been able to exert the normal influences over the course of public affairs.

These authorities have used these powers relentlessly to build up ‘professional’ careers and vested interests within the service provision industry. For years, they have been designing and delivering services which we never asked for, which don’t meet our real needs, and which – in many cases – add to our social isolation, segregation, and exclusion.

The disabled people’s movement is about breaking out of this self-perpetuating cycle of able-bodied control. It isn’t about protecting the silly mishmash of services which presently exist. But service brokerage will have this effect. Brokers, presumably will potter about in this mishmash, inform us of what exists, and we, through them, will choose the bits which suit us best.

If, as a result of this new breed of service brokers, any changes in the mishmash of service provision are necessary – it will take place at a pace service providers can control, and management of change will rest firmly in their hands. **And in the meantime, through the advocacy of the service broker working with us as individuals, our lack of collective power will keep us shut out of effective participation in the development of disability policy.**

It follows quite naturally from this that service brokerage is also about consumerism, i.e. disabled people are intended to be given better information about, more control over, what they can **consume**. But control over what is **produced** will remain with the service industry.

The desire to portray us as consumers is little more than a further shallow subterfuge. Disabled people have no equivalence with non-disabled people as consumers. As Vic Finkelstein indicates in his book **Attitudes and Disabled People[[5]](#endnote-5)**, our social exclusion has led to goods and services being produced which merely reflect able-bodied norms. Our continued marginalisation and relative poverty makes a farce of the idea that we can exert equivalent consumer power in this able-bodied marketplace.

**If we want equivalence as consumers, we must first attain equivalence as social actors – as equal participants in all areas of social life**. To achieve the changes which are necessary to allow this to happen, we need to build up our own strength and unity within our own organisations. We cannot achieve this as atomised individuals. Brandon and Towe are about pulling down our organisational unity of purpose.

And of course their attempt to co-opt CILs, without consultation, in their service brokerage crusade could, if we were not vigilant, engage disabled people themselves in a model of service delivery least appropriate to our need to develop a powerful voice of our own.

One final point, from the point of view of physically impaired people, is that service brokerage looks a very **partial** approach to satisfying our real needs. Very few brokers would have the advantage, for example, of working holistically within Derbyshire CIL’s ‘seven areas of fundamental need’: information, counselling, housing, technical aids, personal assistance, transport, and access[[6]](#endnote-6).

Some of these needs, for some individual disabled people, can be met ‘off the peg’, out of what presently exists. Other cannot be satisfied without development, pressure, and community action. The process of shifting policy directions, and shifting money into these areas of need – without which integrated living cannot be fully achieved – will certainly need the kind of collective political commitment which BCODP is surely and gradually building up.

If service brokerage has anything practical to offer, it can only be developed sensibly in the context of these wider considerations – otherwise it should be booted all the way back to Canada. Separately from this, Brandon and Towe deserve, metaphorically speaking, a well-aimed boot at the appropriate part of their anatomies until they stop peddling their pet to solutions to our problems over the top of our heads.

1. Very little information on the Woodlands Parents Group is available online. Their papers are held in the University of British Colombia’s Special Collections Library in Vancouver, Canada – DPA Team [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Leonard Cheshire, the founder of the Leonard Cheshire Foundation and its segregated care homes, had taken part in the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima at the end of the war. Ken Davis believed there was a deep link between Cheshire’s part in this horrific murder of innocent civilians and the destruction of the environment, and his later attitude to disabled people. See Davis’s [Disability and the Bomb - the Connection (1986)](https://dpac.uk.net/2015/11/disability-and-the-bomb/) – DPA Team [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The Joshua Committee (named after the Book of Joshua in the Hebrew Bible because it was designed to ‘break down walls’ as strong as those of Jericho) was developed as an advocacy model by the friends and family of Judy Snow – a disabled student living in Toronto, Canada, in the early 1980s. Snow was forced to live in the university hospital while studying as there was no suitable accommodation for her and the local government refused to pay for her to be supported at home. Snow and her friends divided up between them, first, all the work that needed to be done to help Snow live in her own flat and, second, the work needed to prove to the Toronto state government that it was cheaper and more empowering for them for Snow to be supported outside of the hospital. From the information given by Davis here, it seems that Brandon’s version of the Joshua Committee departs significantly from this vision. For more information on the original Joshua Committee, see Judith Snow and Marsha Forest’s [The Joshua Committee - an Advocacy Model (1993)](https://inclusion.com/site/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Joshua-Committee-Model.-Marsha-Forest-Judith-Snow.pdf) – DPA Team [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Published in London by Routeledge in 1978 – DPA Team [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Available to read [here](https://disability-studies.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/40/library/finkelstein-attitudes.pdf) – DPA Team [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. For an explanation of how the Derbyshire Coalition decided on the ‘seven needs’, see Davis’s [A Social Barriers Model of Disability: Theory into Practice (1990)](https://disability-studies.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/40/library/DavisK-davis-social-barriers.pdf) [↑](#endnote-ref-6)