**Mainstreaming: The Necessity of Republicanism**

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**The debate on the “social model” of disability, kicked off by Vic Finkelstein’s article in Disability Now, goes on. Coalition has received three more contributions to the debate:**

**Dick Leamen says we can’t put our faith in a new Government to bring about real social change. – Coalition Editors.**

“The philosophers of the world have only interpreted it in different ways: the point however is to change it.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

Vic Finkelstein’s article in the February edition of Disability Now[[2]](#endnote-2) has rattled a few cages: but that is not the point. It does not matter if some people are upset by the challenge to the current “disability” activity; what is important is how we can judge the way forward for disabled people and our organisations in the country as a whole.

In the early 1970s, some of us who were involved in the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) took part in a debate, and the focus of it was whether or not we are “oppressed” as physically impaired people. There were many different opinions. People contributed their own very personal experiences, and I clearly remember that some strongly denied the concept of “oppression”, whilst describing the most horrendous things that happened to them in their life. What emerged from that debate was the “social” theory of disability and for me the lesson that not all opinions are of equal value.

We could not have had the “social” theory of disability if we had not also distinguished at that time between different opinions about the same experience. So what is Mainstreaming, and in what sense has our national “Disability” Movement “run out of steam?”

Some 20 years ago many of us had put our efforts into campaigning for a disability income. We looked into the State and to a new incoming Government, to improve our conditions of life and to relieve poverty. Then Labour Party supported a grassroots campaign for a disability income: and all our efforts were going to be rewarded by a new Government! It wasn't so, and that dead end motivated UPIAS to try and rethink the nature of the struggle around disability[[3]](#endnote-3).

A generation later, whether some people like it or not, we are in a very similar situation. We have spent our time and collective effort promoting Anti-Discrimination Legislation (ADL). We have failed to develop the “social” theory of disability or to build our practice on the implications that it holds for us. We are still turning to the State and to the establishment, and we are asking them not to oppress us. We remain in the mentality of the “pressure group” and thereby fail to develop organisations that can change an oppressive society. The services and benefits that we receive remain predominantly rooted in a welfare system with which ADL makes no significant break.

A few years ago, I went to Africa because people there asked me to talk on the UN World Programme of Action Concerning Disabled People. At the time the UN estimated that there were 500 million disabled people in the world and 85% of us lived in isolated rural areas of developing countries. Less than 1% of us had any access to rehabilitation services looking at our country from abroad I said the following:

“In most parts of the world, disabled people are struggling just to survive and exist. In some places we are struggling for a decent standard of living amongst our able-bodied peers: but nowhere in the world are disabled people struggling for privilege. We, as an international group, coming together because of our experiences of disability, have no material interest in the maintenance of privilege, not in discrimination against any section of the community.”

At the time I write there is a news item saying that a New Labour shadow cabinet minister has declared himself on a television programme to be a Republican. In this country, the function of Monarchy is to represent the interest of class, privilege and hereditary status. It is the reverse side of discrimination and disablement, woven integrally into the fabric of our imperialist society, culture and controlling institutions.

It is not, as it is sometimes defended, to do with tourism nor with earning foreign currency. The news is that Tony Blair has made the shadow minister retract and apologise for being a republican, even before the television programme was broadcast.

New Labour is going to change nothing about class and privilege in this country, and it offers no way forward against discrimination. Its attainment of power cannot be seen as in the interest of disabled people, nor others who, like us, are oppressed in our society.

The challenge of Mainstreaming[[4]](#endnote-4) is about, for example, aligning “disability” struggle against Monarchy, privilege and patronage and against the forces which defend them. The real challenge is to develop our work around the “social” definition of disability, and to present an alternative policy and practice to Community Care and the Tory-created internal market in the help services that we need.[[5]](#endnote-5) This, and not Anti-Discrimination Legislation, is what affects the lives of disabled people in the inner-London borough where I work[[6]](#endnote-6).

If we can take up, develop, and apply the concept of Mainstreaming to our organisational activities, it offers us the avoidance of a whole generation of wasted effort, looking to political power seekers to solve our problems for us: people who are collectively committed to Monarchy, privilege, patronage and the discriminatory establishment.

Just as UPIAS put disabled people at the forefront of our struggle some twenty-five years ago, so Vic’s article on Mainstreaming does this now. But the ground we have to gain is that our interest is in changing the society we live in, and to do that we have to take a leading position on issues such as whether or not we support Monarchy or republicanism.

All opinions are not the same, nor of equal value to disabled people as a whole.

1. From the eleventh of Karl Marx’s [Theses on Feuerbach (1845)](https://msuweb.montclair.edu/~furrg/gned/marxtonf45.pdf). – DPA Team [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See Vic Finkelstein’s [Outside 'Inside Out' (1996)](https://disability-studies.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/40/library/finkelstein-Inside-Out.pdf) (The edited version which appeared in **Disability Now** is on page 5 of the PDF). **Disability Now** was the monthly magazine of the charity **Scope** (previously known as the **Spastics Society**). Finkelstein’s article was not only controversial because of what it said (it was very critical of the BCODP leadership), but because he published something criticising the movement in a magazine run by what many considered as enemies of the movement. – DPA Team [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Leaman is referring here to the campaign for a universal income for disabled people led by the **Disablement Income Group** – a large activist group that became heavily focussed on lobbying politicians, and was particularly close to many people in the Labour Party. For more information on UPIAS members’ frustrations with how DIG ran their campaign, and why UPIAS decided to oppose them, see sections 5 and 6 of [Paul Hunt's Collected Works](https://gmcdp.com/sites/gmcdp.com/files/Collected%20Works%20of%20Paul%20Hunt%20-%20ISBN%20-%20978%201913%20148%20188.pdf) – DPA Team [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. ‘Mainstreaming’ is a term closely associated with international development programs with disabled people – particularly those run by the United Nations and charities like Action on Disability and Development. The general idea of ‘mainstreaming’ in that context is that, if aid agencies work to help disabled people take up important roles in their local communities (as business owners, workers, local politicians, etc), then poor countries will become more tolerant of disabled people as they get richer and citizens will have greater equality (with the help of other economic development programs). Leaman is playing with this term, and changing its meaning; arguing that, for disabled people, ‘mainstreaming’ must be about changing how power, privilege, and inequality work across a society, not just how other citizens see disabled people – DPA Team [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See Leaman’s [The Commodity of Care (1990)](https://disabledpeoplesarchive.com/article-dick-leaman-the-commodity-of-care-1990/) – DPA Team [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Lambeth is the Borough Leaman is referring to – DPA Team [↑](#endnote-ref-6)