Laying the Ghost of Welfare Paternalism

by Ken Davis

This document was written by Ken Davis in about 1990.

We found it in a box of someone else's belongings, so we are not sure exactly what he wrote it for.

It is about what Ken Davis calls **welfare paternalism**.

**Welfare paternalism** is when professionals, like people who work for the government or for charities, get to decide what is best for disabled people.

It is called **paternalism** because professionals act like they are disabled people's parents.

Ken Davis wrote this paper when there was a Conservative government in Britain.

The government was about to pass a law called the **Health Services and Community Care Bill**.

When this law was passed, it became the **NHS and Community Care Act 1990**. But when Ken wrote this paper, it had not become law yet.

Ken wrote this paper to talk about what might change for disabled people because of that bill.

He says that the bill could make changes that are good for disabled people.

But some disabled people did not think that the changes would be good.

Some disabled people thought that, although the bill said it would make good changes for disabled people, that would not really happen.

Ken thinks that there are good reasons for people to think that. He wrote this paper to explain more about those reasons.

Governments in Britain have passed laws that affected disabled people for hundreds of years.

More recently there have been a lot more laws passed about disabled people.

Ken says that none of these laws have ever really given disabled people everything that they need.

This means that people keep having to make new laws to try to fix problems with the old laws.

We would not need laws about disability if British society did not exclude disabled people to begin with.

Ken says that the Disabled People's Movement needs to campaign for better laws for disabled people.

The laws about disabled people that were passed before have done a lot of harm to disabled people.

They have made society less equal, even if they were supposed to make society more equal.

These laws have allowed disabled people to be kept separate from other people and not allowed to do things that other people can do.

This is called **segregation**.

These laws have also helped to create the **disability industry**.

The **disability industry** is people who make money from disabled people, like social workers and managers of care homes.

People like these have a lot of power over disabled people and they are often listened to when disabled people are not.

These are the people who the government talks to when they write new laws. Ken thinks this is not how it should be.

Ken says it should be obvious that laws about disabled people will not give disabled people what we want for ourselves.

It has mostly been non-disabled people who have had a say in what laws were passed about disabled people.

In the past, disabled people did not get together and shout about what they actually wanted.

This meant non-disabled people could do whatever they wanted and say it was good for disabled people.

Disabled people need to fight them to get this changed.

The Disabled People's Movement is trying to do this, but it has not managed to change much yet.

Ken thinks this is because we have not been organised enough as a movement.

Ken says one reason for this is because we have been kept out of the social life that non-disabled people have.

This means that we have not been able to get people in power to listen to us or to give us what we need.

We still have laws that say what non-disabled people think we need, not what we know we need.

These laws help to give more money and more power to the **disability industry** and less to disabled people.

Ken thinks this will never change unless disabled people can get to make new laws about disability.

Different political groups have different ideas about what is best for disabled people.

This means that the kind of laws that get passed about disabled people are different depending on which political group is in power.

Two ideas that Ken Davis thinks have been important in deciding what laws are passed are **individualism** and **socialism**.

**Individualism** means that each person should get to make choices for themself, but also that each person has to take care of their own needs.

The government at the time liked this idea best, and wanted laws to have less to do with people’s housing, work, or the support they got.

**Socialism** means that everyone in society gets to decide together about important things, and we all take care of each other.

This can mean that the government has to make sure that everyone gets the things that they need.

Some governments from before the time this article was written liked this idea best, but they used it in a way Ken thought was wrong.

They thought **socialism** meant the government deciding how to help everyone, not everyone deciding how to help each other.

Different things happen to disabled people when each of these ideas has more power.

When **individualism** has more power, disabled people are expected to take care of ourselves.

If we can't take care of ourselves, the only help we are likely to get is from charities.

When **socialism** has more power, disabled people are supposed to have a right to get what we need from society.

Instead of charity, we should get help to get what we need from the government.

But Ken says that the problem with this is that the government might not think we need the same things that we think we need.

The government is more likely to listen to what the disability industry says disabled people need than to what disabled people say.

Ken says that it often goes backwards and forwards between individualism and socialism having more power.

The way that government treats disabled people keeps changing, but Ken thinks that some things have got better.

But some things have not changed at all, and the things that have changed have only changed a little bit.

For hundreds of years disabled people have had changes that affect us made by non-disabled people.

Things might change more now we have a Disabled People's Movement, but it will need to get stronger to get disabled people what they need.

Britain is supposed to be a **democracy**.

This means that everyone in the country has a say about laws and other big decisions that affect everyone.

Voting in elections is one important part of democracy.

Having the right to vote might or might not mean having equal power in society.

But the more people who have the right to vote, the nearer we can get to everyone being equal.

There have been a lot of laws passed in Britain's history that gave more people the right to vote.

For example, women first got the right to vote in 1929. Before then, only men could vote in elections in Britain.

Ken says that each time a law is passed to give more people the right to vote, it makes it more likely that more laws giving more people rights will be passed in the future.

But for disabled people, there is a different problem with voting.

Disabled people might have the right to vote by law, but other things might stop us from being able to vote.

Ken says this is different to how other groups of people were stopped from voting in the past, like slaves in ancient Greece or black people in South Africa.

Those groups of people were stopped from voting by laws that said they were not allowed to.

But disabled people are stopped from voting because the places where we need to go to vote are not accessible.

So we are allowed to vote by the law, but in reality we do not always get to vote.

This means we are kept out of one of the most important parts of democracy.

Disabled people have been allowed to have a **postal vote**.

This means voting by sending a form in the post instead of going to the place where everyone else goes to vote, which might be inaccessible.

This is one way that disabled people have been able to use their right to vote.

But Ken says that giving disabled people this way to vote has been an excuse for not making the places where most people vote accessible for everyone.

This means that disabled people still do not have the same right to vote as non-disabled people.

There was a law passed in 1985 called the **Representation of the People Act**.

This law said that places where people vote need to be made accessible so that disabled people can vote with everyone else.

But the law said that this only needs to be done when it is "reasonable".

This means that someone could say that a place does need to be made accessible if it is too difficult or too expensive.

Someone can decide whether a disabled person should be allowed to vote or not, without disabled people getting any say about that.

Ken says we should be angry about this because it takes away our equal right to vote.

Ken says this is partly because it is not just the actual buildings where people vote that need to be made accessible.

To be able to get to those places, we need accessible streets and accessible public transport.

We might also need support from PAs to get there.

All these things cost the government money, so they don't want to give us them unless we convince them to.

To do that, we need to have an equal right to vote.

So the problem goes round in circles.

Everything in society must be accessible for all disabled people to vote, but we need to vote to get everything made accessible!

This means lots of disabled people are still kept outside of democracy.

We need to get accessibility in every part of society.

But Ken thinks that making voting accessible is one of the most important things to do first because it is such a big part of democracy.

For democracy to work properly, people need to get a say about everything that the government does.

If voting is not accessible for disabled people, then disabled people can not have an equal say about what the government does.

Governments need to know that people can get rid of them if they do not like what the government is doing.

Ken says that a lot of the ways that people think about disabled people's lives in Britain come from older times and should be left behind.

Lots of people think that it is right and normal that non-disabled people get to make decisions for disabled people.

Even when people do not think this is right, they still think that it is non-disabled people who know the best way to change things.

Governments have made a lot of laws and decisions that are influenced by these ways of thinking.

For a long time people have had a lot of different ideas about what sort of services disabled people need.

Governments talking about these ideas came up with something that we call the **Welfare State**.

**Welfare** means people having the things that they need to be happy and healthy, such as food, healthcare and safe places to live.

Ken is a socialist, so he believes that everyone should have the right to these things.

This is now being threatened in Britain because individualism is getting more power than socialism.

People have cared about welfare for a long time. There are lots of examples in history of governments giving people money for their welfare.

But the idea of the **Welfare State** is more modern.

The **Welfare State** is a system of benefits and services that the government provides for everyone in the country.

In the Welfare State, it is the government that decides what everyone needs and what everyone should get.

Another idea that Ken says is important for thinking about the Welfare State is **paternalism**.

The word **paternalism** comes from a Greek word for father.

It means treating people how parents treat their children.

But Ken says that it is bad to treat adults that way.

If governments treat adults like children, they can interfere in people's lives in ways that people might not want.

Ken says that this is a kind of **oppression**.

**Oppression** means when people with power over other people treat them unfairly or cruelly.

Groups of people who have less power than other groups of people in society, such as disabled people, can be called **oppressed** groups.

Ken says that **welfare paternalism** is one type of oppression for disabled people.

This is because it is used by the **disability industry** to take power and control away from disabled people.

Disabled people are oppressed by people who are paid by the government to care for them.

These people treat disabled adults like they are children and do not let disabled people make their own choices like other adults can.

Ken says there are lots of reasons why this has happened, going a long way back in history.

At one time, giving money or services to disabled people was something that people did on their own because they thought it was the right thing to do.

This could be because of their religion or because they felt sorry for disabled people.

Slowly over time, governments started taking over more and more welfare services for disabled people.

Ken says that the biggest change happened with the **Industrial Revolution**.

The **Industrial Revolution** happened 200 years ago when lots of new inventions made it quicker and cheaper to make materials for buildings, ships and clothes.

To make these materials, factories were built by rich people.

These factories were full of machines that were very fast, and hard for humans to keep up with.

Poor people from the countryside were forced to come work the new machines.

But the factory bosses didn’t want disabled people as workers. They thought disabled people would work too slowly.

Before the Industrial Revolution, disabled people usually lived with their families and their needs were taken care of in their local communities.

But after the Industrial Revolution, many non-disabled family members moved away to work in the factories.

Fewer people lived and worked together in their homes and communities than before.

This meant that it was harder for disabled people's families or communities to take care of them.

So governments needed to make systems of services for disabled people.

This was how the **disability industry** became what it is now.

Ken says this means the welfare services we have now are different from the ways that disabled people were given things by non-disabled people before.

Ken says that what we have now is like a bargain between disabled people and society.

Society gives disabled people welfare as long as disabled people accept that things will stay the same as they are now.

We are allowed to be part of society as long as we try to be as much like non-disabled people as we can.

Welfare paternalism can seem like it is just non-disabled people wanting to be kind to disabled people and doing it badly.

But Ken says that it is more than this.

Welfare paternalism is a way for non-disabled people to control disabled people's lives.

This does a lot of harm to disabled people.

Some disabled people depend on the Welfare State for lots of very important things in their lives.

This means that it can be very scary to think about losing them.

Disabled people are scared that the government might take back the things that it gives us.

Ken says that disabled people are often too afraid of losing the welfare services we get to think very hard about the Welfare State and how it treats us.

It feels dangerous to say bad things about the services that we are given.

If we say that we don't like or don't want these services, we might get them taken away.

All of this makes it hard to believe that things can be better for disabled people than they are now.

Ken says that the Disabled People's Movement is made less powerful by disabled people being afraid to say what we think about the Welfare State.

Disabled people should not let the government scare us into not talking about the things that harm us.

When we stop being afraid to say what we really think, we can fight to get rid of welfare paternalism and to get what we really need and want.