

A QUESTION OF CHOICE

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We in the Union have always been clear about our feelings towards the existence of segregated residential Homes. We regard our struggle for the replacement of these facilities as an important part of our struggle for emancipation:

“The Union aims to have all segregated facilities for physically impaired people replaced by arrangements for us to participate fully in society. These arrangements must include the necessary financial, medical, technical, educational, and other help required from the State to enable us to gain maximum possible independence in daily living activities, to achieve mobility, to undertake productive work and to live where and how we choose with full control over our lives” (1).

“But how”, we are often asked, “can we campaign to close down segregated residential institutions for physically impaired people, and so remove this choice from their lives, and at the same time say we are struggling to increase choice?”

Real and spontaneous choices.

When we take a closer look at these institutions we will see that they were set up by people who were quite unable to think creatively about alternatives for disabled people faced by a lack of accommodation choices in the community. It is a symptom of an oppressive society that it offers no real choice for severely physically impaired people to live independently in the community. This poses the problem, for those who wish to help us, either to struggle with us to create such increased choices in the community, or to accept these lack of choices and remove us from society. The creators of residential institutions spontaneously chose not to struggle to change the oppressive society but rather to remove us from society. A grudging admission of this has now been made by one apologist for these Homes:

“In fact, it can be suggested that the original early type of Cheshire accommodation offered, in practice, the reverse of integration in society. it could even be described as being ‘Segregation from Society’” (2) page 6.

From the above it would appear that the existence of segregated residential Homes depends and builds upon a lack of choice in society. Let us look at this more closely. When able-bodied segregationists indulge themselves in their periodic gatherings to pat themselves on the back and give “do-gooding” awards to one another they give us some insight into their attitudes about our oppression. No segregationist has received more of these able-bodied awards than Leonard Cheshire, the father of the more liberal “Cheshire” Homes, and on these occasions they never tire of telling us how the first Home was started:

After the second World War Cheshire had been involved in a failed venture to set up a co-operative community scheme for ex-servicemen. “In May 1948, while winding up this project and disposing of a large country house, Le Court in Hampshire, he was told that one of the ex-members of the settlement, a 75-year old man, was dying of cancer and had nowhere to go. After trying unsuccessfully to find accommodation for the man, Leonard Cheshire took him into the house and nursed him until he died. Then others came.....” (3) page 15.

It is clear that the first inmate of the Le Court Cheshire Home lacked choices in the community. Cheshire tried “unsuccessfully to find accommodation for the man” who “had

nowhere to go”. When Cheshire was faced with this real lack of accommodation he did not use his much acclaimed talents to struggle for increased choices in the community but spontaneously accepted the dictates of an oppressive society. He set up an institution which left the lack of accommodation alternatives in the community for physically impaired people absolutely unchanged. Far from offering an increase in accommodation choices for disabled people in the community the building of segregated residential accommodation serves to keep the choices in the community permanently limited.

Either one joins with disabled people in trying to change the real world so that “we all have the means to choose where and how we wish to live” (4) in the community or one joins the oppressors by devising means of avoiding the creation of real community alternatives. Facing a real lack of accommodation choices for physically impaired people, one might have thought, would be “significant enough” for this problem to become “an urgent reason for re-examining fundamental issues” (5) page 12. However, just as the people who created the Disability Alliance studiously avoided analysing the way society disables physically impaired people (just when such an analysis was most needed) and. “adopted ‘spontaneity’ as its basic method for reacting to the problems we face” (5) page 12, so too Cheshire makes a virtue of ignorance:

“If I were asked what I look upon as the most important element or feature of the way the Foundation came into being and subsequently developed, I think I would answer, its spontaneity. We have so far never planned. our growth, never tried to decide where the next home ought to be opened ...” (6) page 4.

It is no accident that those who are insensitive to the oppressive nature of our society should be so much in harmony in campaigning around isolated issues, such as “benefits” and “accommodation”, and in defending their “spontaneous” efforts in these areas. Able-bodied helpers (precisely because they do not suffer the social oppression of disability) have to choose between real community alternatives or they will spontaneously defend. able-bodied chauvinism and. see our problems as unconnected to their society.

Are able-bodied spontaneous choices real choices for physically impaired people?

Some might agree that removing physically impaired people from society and placing them in segregated residential accommodation means an acceptance of limited choices in the community. But at the time, they argue, the segregated residential Home “was the only alternative to life in a total institution “ (7) page 7. While there are now new developments which might enable a physically impaired person to remain in his or her home, the argument goes, at that time Cheshire Homes, for example, were a great step forward. The telling point is that this type of defence of past spontaneous mistakes has to be repeated again even when referring to later Cheshire Foundation residential provision:

The Cheshire Estate was built in co-operation with the Greater London Council in 1954 at Tulse Hill in London for physically impaired people and their families. “I am sorry to say that this particular experiment has been widely criticised as producing a ghetto; a separate nucleus of handicapped. living. We could, not help being rather resentful of this criticism because, although nowadays it is, admittedly, not the most acceptable way of integrating people into society, it was a great step forward at its time”. (2) page 7.

It is the destiny of those who do not consciously examine the social cause of our disability to make the same type of mistakes over and over again. Thus it is hardly surprising that the Cheshire Foundation, like the Disability Alliance, should. find itself being forced to excuse

its past. We can be certain to hear more of these “resentful” excuses until the Foundation and the Alliance are disbanded as the spontaneous mistakes of able-bodied chauvinists and segregationists.

Another line of argument is that, while in general, segregated residential Homes may serve to limit the provision of increased choices in the community, these Homes do increase the choices of certain individuals;

“We believe that no person should have to enter or remain in a residential home because of lack of a more suitable alternative for that person. Those last three words are of crucial importance” (7) page 7.

Two examples are offered and in the first we are told that a woman required some “daily assistance”, that “domiciliary care” was not available “from Friday evening until Monday morning” and that therefore “she felt compelled to leave home” and that “she had no real choice” (7) page 7. It seems peculiarly tortuous reasoning to conclude that this person who was forced into a Home had been offered a “suitable alternative”! The obvious alternative was to set up a domiciliary service which provided all the help she needed. The fact that the rich can have servants, maids, butlers, whenever they wish proves that such help is possible but that an oppressive society makes the provision of large scale community help for non-rich physically impaired individuals impossible to set up without facing up to, and admitting that, our society is oppressive. Cheshire, and his flatterers, of course, could hardly dream that their able-bodied world is at fault any more than they can dream that their Homes are wrong (3) page 12. They fail to see the admission of no choices for a severely impaired person in society is also an admission that the real choice we face is either to change society or be oppressed by it and get institutionalised. The very existence of these Homes, therefore, is a denial of the choice to oppose oppression by providing community support systems enabling us to live in our homes.

In the second example we are told that the inmate was compulsorily institutionalised in the usual way: her parents “fussed and worried over (her) and (she) had no life of (her) own. When they could no longer cope” she entered the Home (7) page 7. Having learnt that society does not make arrangements for people such as herself to live in their own homes (and not necessarily just with their parents) and having been in the Home for a time it hardly seems surprising that she is reluctant to leave when later she is given the choice of assistance in a flat of her own. She prefers the Home where she feels she can “lead the life” she wishes. She can only conceive of loneliness “in a flat on (her) own”. Hiding behind this inmate’s genuine fear of her ability to leave the Home and cope in the community the segregationist tries to confuse us about the difference between providing suitable alternative residential arrangements in the community and the problems of an inmate moving out of an institution. The offer of accommodation in the community, itself, was an admission that this person had not really been given a suitable alternative in the first place!

When people began to move out of institutions the organisers of the Swedish Fokus scheme faced this same problem in that country (9) page 118. The provision of real alternative accommodation arrangements in the community led to significant numbers of inmates leaving their Homes and provided living examples to those who were less confident in their ability to cope. The less confident, with additional guidance and support, were then moved out of the Homes. Thus, instead of using the isolated and less confident as examples to the more determined, as the apologists for Cheshire Homes likes us to think, the achievements of the more confident are used as models of what can be done. In this way physically impaired people are encouraged to look forward and progressively reintegrate into the society from which they have been excluded. Despite the efforts of the segregationists Cheshire Home

inmates have been moving out of these Homes and nothing makes more clear the backward thinking and denial of support in providing suitable accommodation alternatives in the community than their wish to stem our exodus:

“Because of the changing attitudes to the disabled, society today is providing more facilities for the handicapped to remain in their own homes. The severely disabled people who need to go into residential care these days tend to be so heavily impaired that they cannot be expected to make a positive contribution to the community. They only need to be cared for. So, incredible as it may seem, Le Court now finds itself publicising its need for new residents of low dependency, who can contribute to the home and lead a fuller life” (10) page 4.

“Real”, real choices.

Instead of struggling with us to provide real residential choices in the community the segregationists spontaneously accept that physically impaired people sometimes have “no real choice”. They build their Homes for us on this fact of oppression. Our accommodation problems are social, not personal, problems. The endemic lack of suitable accommodation arrangements for able-bodied people proves the social origins of our residential problems. It is this society, therefore, which has to be changed.

Able-bodied chauvinists who make spontaneous choices which leave the restrictive society unchanged help perpetuate our dependency on others. They do this whenever they insist on treating any aspect of our oppression in isolation. Thus we find the narrow approach to “incomes” advocated by the Disability Alliance, keeps us in a permanent state of beggary for State Charity hand-outs from social administrators (as the Union has already fully exposed in reference (5)). Similarly, the segregationists who approach our residential requirements in isolation, leave the oppressive society intact and elevate themselves into permanent positions of power over us. The ones who profit the most are the able-bodied chauvinists. “Helping” physically impaired, people opens up a secure career future. It can also be a wonderful way of receiving a public award. One night even join the Oligarchy of the Beatific Egoists or become a recipient of the Cripple Beguiling Expert medal!

The only real choice of physically impaired. people is the struggle for alternative accommodation arrangements whereby we can live in, and be a part of, the community of human beings. The existence of Homes, institutions and all forms of segregated facilities are a denial of choice within this community. A few hundred years ago some people were segregated from society by being made into slaves. Nowadays we can all accept that slavery is a denial of choice. A person cannot “choose” to be oppressed as a slave in Britain today. The time is not all that far away when it will be publicly accepted that residential Homes supported our continuing oppression. When that happens it will also be accepted that people cannot really choose to be oppressed and move into a Home. History will then pronounce its judgement on those who set up these Homes.

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