

Working with Able-Bodied People *

Vic Finkelstein – 2 May, 1991

For centuries able-bodied people have made decisions for and about disabled people without consulting us. They have decided what we can and can't do (eg. prohibited signing for communication), where we can go and where barriers are built which restrict our entry (eg. British Rail). In their rehabilitation programmes they decide appropriate behaviour for us and write knowingly about our psychological problems and our need to adjust to their ideas about normality (eg. we carry the stigma while they cover up their prejudices). In all this they have overbearingly assumed expertise and ridiculed even our right to question their objectivity and entitlement to make decisions for us.

When they design equipment for themselves these are produced to make life easier and extend their own capabilities, they become treasured possessions (eg. the motor car). When they design equipment for us, however, these are produced to compensate for inabilities, they are to be avoided whenever possible (eg. rather the walking stick than the electric wheelchair). They scorn the apartheid system of South Africa while they honour themselves endlessly with awards for building segregated residential homes and systematically isolating disabled people from the rest of the population in special schools, places of work, transport systems, etc. There has been no recognition of the fundamental hurt they have done to us under the guise of 'caring for the disabled'.

A recent example of this undemocratic view about 'rights' in decision making on disability has been the import of 'conductive education' into the UK from the Peto Institute in Budapest, Hungary. This 'total' system for the education of disabled people is geared towards making us 'normal'. No one involved in inventing and supporting the philosophy which feeds the Peto approach has produced the slightest evidence that it might be proper to find out from disabled people how we want to live our lives and what kind of future we want for ourselves as disabled adults. It can be no accident that this system was invented in Hungary and that disabled people have no public profile in that country. It can only be a matter of time before disabled people in Hungary, like their able-bodied peers, throw off this kind of arrogant bureaucratic dominance and control over their lives. And what about able-bodied respect for our democratic rights when Peto was introduced here, when the government decided to pour money into this able-bodied fantasy of making us normal? Of course the representative bodies of disabled people were not consulted!

Small wonder, then, that many disabled people not only have no confidence in the ability of able-bodied people to think objectively about disability issues on our behalf but many believe only disabled people can be the 'experts' in disability studies, service design and delivery, etc. I believe this is the wrong response.

Some twenty years ago members of the now defunct Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation began suggesting that disability was created by the way the physical and social aspects of society were organised for able-bodied living. We argued that the long term solution could only be achieved by changing this world (not, as rehabilitation will have it, by changing us) so that we can live in it as different but equal partners with our able-bodied peers. Changing the world so that it is more appropriately arranged for us (ie. so that it no longer disables people with physical and mental impairments) also means, if you think about

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it, profound changes to the way able-bodied people have organised 'their' world and 'their' lifestyles.

We cannot, and should not, I believe, try to impose our wishes about the proper organisation of the social and physical world on able-bodied people any more than we can accept their imposition of their world on us. This is not an argument in support of the narrow view that able-bodied people are the majority and therefore any changes wanted by disabled people can only be achieved with able-bodied consent and support. This is, rather, an argument in favour of one of the basic principles of struggles for emancipation. Quite simply, liberation movements cannot succeed in overcoming oppression by working out solutions which may in turn oppress others.

Such solutions will, first of all, be resisted by those who are affected by changes which they do not understand. Secondly, if solutions do not have consent from all those affected they will surely re-organise in narrow interest groups and, when we fail to make common cause with our natural allies, emancipation will be even further away. The growth of associations of able-bodied carers in recent times is a prime example of fragmentation in disability struggles for appropriate support systems in favour of narrow self-defeating interests. Changing the world according to our wishes requires informed agreement from all groups who have an interest in seeing changes to eliminate the discrimination that they face. The vast majority of these people are able-bodied.