

## THOSE WHO THINK THEY KNOW

I did not choose to become an advocate for disabled and disadvantaged people. It just happened that when I heard people around me talking from a position of complete ignorance, I just couldn't keep my mouth shut. I remember at the tender age of about nineteen, being at a conference about disabled people and personal relationships. A day centre manager proudly told us that he didn't allow his 'patients' to start or develop romantic or sexual relationships and I exploded with indignation. These were adults he was talking about, not small children! He did not much appreciate my outburst, but many members of the group did - so much so that I was hugged by a doctor who told me, tearfully, that I had completely changed her thinking. I was amazed. I didn't know doctors did hugging.

It seemed to me that my big mouth could be useful because so many of my disabled friends and comrades had been so intimidated that they found it very difficult to express their thinking in public, so I have continued to speak up wherever it made sense. However, something has continuously happened since I first started challenging the non-disabled world which is that I get told 'It is alright for me – I am clever, articulate, only physically disabled etc. etc.' It always comes from the mouths of non-disabled people who are claiming to represent the interests of all those others who cannot speak for themselves. This interest usually means continuing to 'protect' them in segregated schools and services. There is little that can make me as angry as that particular accusation and I have tried to think why.

Firstly it is the assumption that everything I know or care about comes only from my own individual experience and that I know nothing outside of it. In reality I have had more personal relationships with disabled people than any able-bodied person I know. From the age of three I was hospitalised with them, sent to special school with them, been a member of the disability movement with them, worked alongside them. I have heard story after story of struggle, laughed and cried, thrashed out ideas, listened to hopes and

fears, agreed on common goals and fought collectively for them. I have known people of all ages, types and levels of impairments, social and ethnic backgrounds. From this rich community many of us are trying to communicate what we have learnt to those who still hold a great deal of power over our lives.

Many of us get dismissed in similar ways. People with Learning Difficulties at last manage to form their own organisation 'People First' and start to be powerful self advocates for real change, and what do people say? "Are, but they are the most able, they are not like ours".

There is a second wider issue. Throughout history each oppressed group has had to self-organise and learn how to represent their group in public, to challenge unjust laws and practices. Women have done it. Black people have done it. Gay and lesbian people have done it. Working class people and many other groups have done it. When each group begins to organise it is inevitable that the first leaders will be those most able and best resourced from within the group. The suffragettes were led by owning class white women. Black people by well educated middle class black men. The disability movement was largely initiated by white, middle class males who acquired their impairments as adults. They had grown up as able-bodied young people, had access to an ordinary family life, an education, expectations, relationships, and experience of organising. How could it be otherwise? This doesn't mean that their own struggles were not relevant, or they had not done their homework. It does not mean they could not make a platform for each successive 'layer' of their group, or that they had not already listened to and taken into account many different voices before they became spokespeople. In fact without the trust and support of the wider group, no one remains a leader very long.

Of course it is true that some people in every oppressed group still do not have the means or resources to directly tell us what they need. It seems to me a fair bet however that their needs will be more like their close but slightly more able comrades who have experienced 90% of the same things, than the

imagined needs and consequent services dreamed up by people who have, by definition never experienced anything else than the role of provider, carer or oppressor, and whose position led each group to protest in the first place.

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