

coalition

“The Social Model Under Attack” – by Anne Rae

(First published in Coalition, August 1996)

The Social Model of Disability, which explains how we are disabled by discrimination and exclusion from participating on an equal basis in mainstream society, is under attack. I have chosen the word "attack" deliberately. If the validity of it was being challenged, my concern would not be as great as it is, because challenges to ideas are usually made by people who clearly demonstrate that they understand what is being challenged. But the attacks on the Social Model of Disability are being made by people who demonstrate in what they write that they do not understand the definition of disability used by the Social Model, and do not understand the difference between disability and impairment. This distinction is crucial to understanding how the application of the Social Model, which is pertinent to all the structures of society we would want to access - from health care, education, transport, through to leisure pursuits - takes into account the individual's specific needs relating to their particular impairment.

The implication of the universal and wholehearted acceptance of the Social Model by mainstream society is that disabled people will be respected and welcomed members of that society. And when considering that massive sea change in attitudes towards us, I cannot agree with Vic Finkelstein that the battle for acceptance of the Social Model is a battle that has been won. Had it been, we would surely have had a comprehensive Anti-Discrimination Bill for Disabled People by now - we would not still be facing a daunting struggle for human and civil rights, probably for some years ahead. This struggle will only be won by organisations of disabled people arguing clearly for the acceptance and application of the Social Model at local and national level.

I would argue that until we have working partnerships across the country between disabled people and town and country planners and policy makers, establishing anti-discrimination policies which are enforceable, we should not expend any more of our precious resources on the struggle for Anti Discrimination Law through Parliament. It's my view that we are currently in a no-win situation. The Conservative Party have made it clear that the imminent DDA is all that we can expect from them. And Tony Blair has made it quite clear that the Labour Party will not repeal the DDA if they come into power. So whichever party gets into power at the

next election we will be resuming a struggle in the full and certain knowledge that whichever party we engage on this matter will not even be meeting us halfway.

What is happening now is that a few people, disabled people, are saying that the Social Model of Disability does not take into account the specific needs relating to impairment. They are calling for a "Social Model of Impairment" within which we can chart our individual experience of impairment, including from our experiences of rejection, pain, lack of self-esteem etc etc. Should fill a few hundred volumes, adding to those which already exist on library shelves, which are poured over by academics determined to establish the psychological state of impaired people. This, and the accounts of the negative effects on individuals of the fact of impairment, will lend weight to the arguments for aborting us and practising euthanasia upon us. The other effect of this sort of stuff is that it feeds into the voyeuristic needs of some non-disabled people who seem to need to know what it is like to be impaired - those who read the "triumph over tragedy" stories of disabled people in magazines, gulping "Isn't it a shame" at the end of each one.

What bemuses me about this is that each of us who share a similar impairment experience different reactions to it - whose account will be deemed the definitive one? What the Social Model allows us to do is to chart the injustice which all disabled people deal with because of our impairments. It provides us with a tool with which to fight for social change, within which our personal needs related to our specific impairment can be met. (I have repeated this because it cannot be stated too often). All else belongs to book shelves devoted to Self Help, Counselling or Peer Support Structures, not with the volumes seeking political and social change.

Most disabled people need comfort and support at times, both for what we deal with as disabled people and as impaired people; and Jenny Morris is quite wrong to state in her article in the May edition of "Disability Now" that the disability movement prohibits any discussion of our personal experiences - what is recognised by the movement is the need to keep that discussion out of the public domain for the reasons already given.

Jenny Morris is also concerned that the disability movement is male dominated, thus dismissing at a swipe the incredible amount of work put into the movement by hundreds of disabled women. Far outnumbering men, they work, either as paid employees or on a voluntary basis, at local and national levels, and I would go so far as to say the movement could not exist without these women. However, were she to submit that disabled men dominate the academic and theoretical high ground, defining and documenting disability politics, I would agree with her. But I would lay some of the blame with her and people who have gone before her - women writers like Jo Campling and Ann Shearer, who have encouraged disabled women to concentrate on writing accounts of our personal experience of being impaired women.

The cost has been that some of our strongest women have become overwhelmed by the "the personal is political" philosophy, and become reluctant to enter into the stricter discipline of purer political analysis and debate.

Debate is essential to take us forward -there is not enough of it in the disability movement because we have so few platforms - but debate based on the misunderstanding of a theory or philosophy is a waste of time and, worse, causes divisions which need not exist. I believe that this is the case with the controversy around the Social Model of Disability.

Copyright

We generally look favourably on requests from disabled people who want to reproduce items for campaigning or educational purposes, but permission is required by contacting the editor via the GMCDP office. If the item is for inclusion in a publication, we request that the following accompanies the item: Coalition (Month/Year) the magazine produced by the Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People.

For further details contact the Coalition editor c/o: info@gmcdp.com)