

Citation: Kendrick, Michael J., *"The Leadership Challenges In Ireland In Regards To Altering The Conditions Of Life For People With Disabilities"*, The Frontline Of Learning Disability, Autumn, 2005, pg.26-27, Dublin, Ireland

Title: Commentary: The Leadership Challenges In Ireland In Regards To Altering The Conditions Of Life For People With Disabilities

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Commentary: The Leadership Challenges In Ireland In Regards To Altering The Conditions Of Life For People With Disabilities

Recent times in Ireland would give the impression that Ireland is poised to make many advances in regards to place of people with disabilities within Irish society. This is most markedly evident in the apparent engagement and activism of the government in regards to such key issues as the creation of new authorities, the promotion of advocacy, the initiating of new standards and legislation and increased funding. Perhaps the most prominent of these is the recent Disability legislation that has been withdrawn and reworked, and is now being debated. While it is still uncertain as to its actual fate and character, it has successfully propelled the question of governmental action front and center in the agendas of both activists and government itself. Though there are skeptics, this responsiveness by government is not an illusion, as much of this activity has been prompted by the voice of people with disabilities and their allies asking for change. It is worthwhile to consider why there has even been a disability bill put forward in the first place, and the role of civil society in giving it such public priority.

Such governmental activity is often believed by many to be a necessary centerpiece in the change process, because it involves the symbolic and practical application of State power and authority on many matters. Nonetheless, such an increased tempo of governmental initiatives has also been evident in many other countries on even more frequent occasions, but sometimes with far less long term change resulting than many might have hoped for. For instance, in the United States, there have been put into place an unrelenting and bewildering array of quite well intentioned governmental initiatives at the community, state, federal levels that have not come close to resolving the essential issues involved. For instance, Americans with disabilities and their allies still struggle with physical access, school inclusion, employment, poverty, stigma, empowerment, individualization, rights, gaps in services, institutions and mini-institutions, abuse and neglect, invasive bureaucracy and so on. There have been advances notwithstanding, but clearly increased governmental activity is no panacea.

The reason that such ambiguous results are foreseeable rests in the mistaken assumption that the root of the difficulties that people with disabilities face is principally due to the conduct of governments. As important as governments are, they are not nearly always as central as are other aspects of society itself. For instance, even in countries where there exist relatively massively funded and extensive formal service systems to support people with disabilities, families and friends, by and large, still remain the most reliable and enduring form of social support for people with disabilities. Equally, much of what people with disabilities most importantly need in life is actually provided by communities, not service systems i.e. relationship, jobs, security, standing and value, membership, respect etc. For instance, almost everywhere

in the world where inclusive community living for people has been made a prominent “named” purpose, people are still struck by how persistently socially isolated people with disabilities are in community life, even after decades of earnest work.

The preceding would not be an argument for abandoning the quite rightful goal of enriched community living for people with disabilities, most notably for those whose level of impairment and dependence is more overarching and life defining. Rather, the more measured implication is that it is quite useful to broaden the definition of leadership challenges to also include others that may be overshadowed in the present due to the “single path” focus on government.

These challenges go well beyond government itself and could include the whole of civil society. They encompass the transformation of vision, values and perspective, the improvement of the way communities welcome people with disabilities into community groups, the support of families and natural supporters in their ability to stand alongside people, the scope of autonomy afforded to people with disabilities, the reduction of the disproportionate victimization of people with disabilities by crime and violence, the elimination of very entrenched custodial mindsets and settings, the expansion of the presence of people with disabilities in the economy, the nurturing of innovation and personal leadership, improved ethicality in how professionals and service providers actually conduct themselves, to name but a few of the leadership challenges that need to be taken up alongside that of making government function more helpfully.

Ireland would do well to avoid the quite human temptation to shrink from the interdependency and complexity of these numerous and very long term community leadership challenges within Irish society, and instead embrace one or another “silver bullet” that presumably, if pursued with great singularity, would allegedly make “all the difference”. There are many such panaceas, and a multitude of potential adherents for easy answers and pathways, whether these be more funding, more research, more professionals, more laws, more person centered plans, more standards, more quality assurance, more certifications, more advocacy, more rights, more technologies, more re-organizations, more services, or whatever. While it is conceivable that each of these may have a contribution to make, their elevation to overall transcendent importance is likely to disappoint and disillusion.

A much better approach to change, though it will require more reflection and appreciation of nuance, would be to see and pursue the possibilities of alliances between a multiplicity of distinct change initiatives and constituencies, such that they reinforce each other and summate in a more collective change effect. In most societies, this is what people would call

“social movements”, and their character and membership is normally diverse, informal for the most part, and bred and nurtured in many small corners of civil society. Strong and expressive social movements paradoxically help produce more enlightened governments, greater pressures for change, the championing of minority and disadvantaged interests, the progressive education of the public and innovation amongst other things, when the vision, values and directions they uphold are both positive and adamantly pursued.

The reason for this is that social movements are the most direct way to challenge civil society itself by initiating actions that cause communities to have to confront their conduct, commitments and values from within. Social movements are not as hamstrung by the formal structures of society, since their path of change is through influence rather than institutional authority. Consequently, as a vehicle for change, they can largely craft their own strategies and tactics, and use the informal web of community connections that bypass so many formal barriers. It is precisely their ability to resist and challenge established and sanctioned pathways that makes them so transformative. The present emphasis on the rights of people with disabilities has clearly not gained strength from governmental preferences as much as it has capitalized on public sentiment in favor of equality of rights of all citizens.

Social movements eventually are the trigger for governmental action, since it is they that mount the campaigns that eventually result in mobilized constituencies. This comes about through the leadership of offering an initially discordant and dissenting vision of community and personal life and building the case for its more widespread adoption. They can convert alienation into passion, suffering into a sense of hope, and obstacles into the basis of a critique of civil life and an advocacy for something better. They also can bring alignments between otherwise independent groups and interests, and build upon earlier movements for change by demonstrating the continuities that persist. Advocacy cut off from the constituencies of social movements will be ineffectual, as it is these perceived constituencies that are duly noted by those with political authority.

At a more psychological level, social movements bring people not only to a new vision, they also help bring people to decision, commitment and a resolve to act and persevere. Collectively, such multiple transformations can summate into a new defining and shared social reality, but this is by no means guaranteed. There is a great deal of work involved in altering community life, and the pursuit of a new consensus is normally a demanding uphill process, as it requires countless people to shift their ground and significantly trust in a new way forward. However, if these processes occur in a widespread enough way, there will eventually be changes in the more formal parts of society that will mirror these emergent directions. Social movements are a catalyst, and once their work is done, it is often the case that new ones are needed to

succeed them in order to maintain momentum and progress. Much of what is today's status quo might well be a remnant of earlier social changes.

Social changes, and the movements that accompany them, do not arise in a vacuum, nor are they a panacea, as they very much require the unrelenting expression of a personal leadership being taken at all levels of community life, and in regards to multiple aspects of the key issues in play. This creates the space for emergent leaders to arise, and to offer what they will to facilitate change and to re-imagine a better world. Since this leadership is so diverse, diffuse and frequently anonymous in its obscurity, it is often discounted in favor of deference to more tangible and legitimate institutional authority. This would be very mistaken, as change more often than not comes from the margins where the need for it is more obvious. Governments eventually do respond, but often only once the essential battles have been fought and settled within community.