

The treatment of disabled people's movements (DPMs) in historical literature suffers from two big drawbacks: i) historians are, generally, less aware of (or interested in) the DPM's primary sources than they are, say, those of the women's lib or anti-racist movements; ii) as a result, their historiographical assumptions (the models for why, how, and when movement developments occur) are largely imported from abstract schema in political science, social movement studies, or social policy studies. These imports are methodologically dubious: firstly because their models only apply in aggregate (they are meant to explain trends, not individual cases); secondly, because they assume that the DPM is an historical object of a certain type (a lobby to influence government or social attitudes), rather than trying to prove that hypothesis from the record.

One of the most common, and unquestioned, assumptions in the literature is that campaigning for anti-discrimination legislation (ADL) is a natural activity for disabled people's movements of a certain size and influence. The argument, sometimes implicit rather than stated, is that if your movement is large enough to plausibly make a government respond to it via legislation, you'd automatically push for the most wide-ranging legislation possible. From a view internal to social movements generally, this is far from obvious. Politically, anti-discrimination legislation alienates a movement's right to define its own oppression; passing this power over to states who, hitherto, have structured and facilitated that oppression. Empirically, campaigns for wide reaching legislation seldom work out well for movements. The campaigns themselves take energy from every other project, and tend to stretch accountability between leaders and grassroots activists to breaking point; while any resulting legislation tends to be punitive towards movement actors and not address their core concerns. For example, the Race Relations Act did little to stop the rise of the National Front, but proved very effective in prosecuting black nationalists like Roy Sawh and Michael X.

There's plenty of evidence from the British movement's literature that disabled activists were deeply sympathetic to those objections. So the question is why, despite these obvious pitfalls, did the movement go all in on a legislative campaign in the early 1990s?

Based on research I've done at the Disabled People's Archive (big up Ella, Steve, and Sarah, who you'll hear from later); my hypothesis is that the ADL campaign in Britain was designed to solve organisational problems internal to the British Council of Organisations of Disabled People (BCODP), and not because anyone particularly believed ADL was desirable. BCODP was the federation of disabled people's organisations in Britain, and originally co-ordinated activity between established activist groups around the country. The early membership had little interest in any sweeping legislation, with members' feedback from conference workshops in the mid '80s describing the idea of an ADL campaign as unrealistic and only worth thinking

about after gains had been made in struggles over housing, education, benefits, and personal support.

A hard to pivot to legislative campaigns occurred in 1990, and was driven by three problems completely internal to BCODP.

- i) Membership had grown unsustainably, nearly doubling over the previous five years. Most new member groups were inexperienced, and looked to BCODP for support that it did not have the capacity to give them. In this context, a campaign focussed on lobbying MPs offered a simple mobilising strategy that required minimal upskilling or organisational development.
- ii) Established member groups were under attack from other government policies – especially around the funding of community services, which threatened several with bankruptcy. BCODP had no strategy to combat this, and leaders hoped that a visible ADL campaign would provide a political counter-weight to these assaults. The campaign was not designed to win, but to put government under enough pressure to reverse course on local government spending.
- iii) In the political context of the time, it was *much easier* to get money from NGOs like the Rowntree Foundation for projects with ‘discrimination’ in the title than ones focussed on housing or education. BCODP’s accounts reveal massive differentials between funding for its project work on discrimination, and basically everything else. As an under-funded and overstretched organisation, BCODP had little choice but to exploit that opportunity.

I won’t pretend that these original motivations explain everything that happened in the following campaign (which was, to my mind, the worst thing to ever happen to disability politics in Britain). My point here is that campaigns of its sort are neither automatic nor simply value led, but often launched under duress as spontaneous reactions to other problems. They reflect more the cunning of history than any linear model of social movement activity.