

# Disability Direct Action - Future Directions

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Within the last three years there has been a rise in Disability direct action. Our demos are rapidly becoming more 'professional' resulting in wider discussion and publicity for our issues. Clearly there is still a long way to go, but we have made a strong beginning. Now seems a good time to consolidate what's been learnt and to make some decisions about future directions.

Compared with groups that have been around for nearly 30 years we are relatively unsophisticated in our demonstrating skills. Yet we are working against a background of demonstrations, policing and beliefs/behaviours which may be extremely sophisticated. We have a lot to learn very quickly and need to study other groups' tactics, successful & failed. Groups such as the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (Act-Up), Greenpeace, CND, Anti-Apartheid, Committee of 100, and of course the US Disability Movement, employ a wide variety of methods from spectacular protests to mass boycotts. These can provide a framework for our campaign work, with additional features which make Disability demonstration distinctive.

In this discussion paper I will draw on my experiences of Disability & other demonstrations, discussions with Disabled friends, and miscellaneous ideas from various sources. I plan to raise a range of issues and questions, some of which will already have received some thought, others which may be new to us. I hope these ideas will provide a starting point for us to clarify exactly what we're working towards and the most effective route/s to take.

The article is based mainly on the anti-Telethon & anti-Children-in-Need (CIN) demonstrations, partly because I'm most familiar with these, but also because the TV charity events probably require the most complex strategy of any of our demos so far.

## 1. **Exactly why are we demonstrating?**

Why have we chosen to demonstrate? Are we totally clear on our objections and demands? This is essential if we are to begin communicating them to anyone else.

These are some of the reasons for our demonstrating against Telethon & CIN. Are there others? Which are our priorities?

- Telethon & CIN are presented as non-political (even though government ministers have taken part in the event), yet they take place in a climate where government policy is to

increase charity & decrease state provision.

- The events' high profile implies things are changing on a large scale. In practice their funds go only half-way towards government estimates of the Social Fund short-fall. They are less than is raised in one day by all UK charities, half of one day's present NHS funding, or around 4.00 per Disabled person. In other words they raise a tiny fraction of what is really needed.
- The money is channeled inappropriately towards segregated 'special' provision or 'trimmings' - toys, holidays, etc. It is not available for real needs - would Telethon/CIN fund cars, medications, food, public transport, mainstream education, etc?
- Charity is unreliable & insecure. State benefits can be laid in statute books & hold some guarantee of minimum & continuing provision.
- We are told that the total money generated is roughly level with inflation (although I'm not sure this is true). However the speed at which the total rises during each event is slowing, and the increase in money raised each year is not consistent. Does this mean people are less willing to contribute? If so that makes it more vital to end Telethon/CIN before their stop-gap role and the central responsibility of state provision are reversed.
- Money is raised and allocated within television regions, so poorer regions with greater need are likely to receive less.
- Telethon/CIN money is controlled by & channeled to non-Disabled/non-recipient controlled groups.
- The images of Disabled people used in these events are selected for their power to invoke pity and guilt. The compilers know this. After Children of Courage was transmitted one presenter jumped for joy at the escalating total, crying 'You're right it has swelled the coffers!'.
- The whole event - from woolly bears to trouser-dropping contests - patronises everyone involved and trivialises the real issues.
- The people for whose 'benefit' the money is raised are not invited to take part or asked whether we want this event to take place.
- We can't even get into this event that has been put on 'for our benefit'. TV Centre is not accessible, the event is not sub-titled & interpreted, etc
- The Broadcasting Bill contains a clause on impartiality. Does that mean we will be allocated 7 full hours' (BBC) or 23 hours' (ITV) programming in a single day to correct the

bias of these events?

People are more likely to be converted by constructive demonstrating. We need to agree the central issues and priorities. They need to be made accessible to people unfamiliar with the debates and journalists who may have only moments to report on our campaign. We often demonstrate **against** things, but are we clear about what we **want**? Are we aiming for:

- Increased government funding?
- An end to some/all charities?
- An end to Telethon and CIN?
- Changes in the specifics of Telethon/CIN - organisation, control, allocation of money, images, etc?

Leaflets and press releases need to be concise, large print, in point form and jargon-free. It's OK to keep our message relatively simplistic at this stage; we're aiming to introduce the issues so people will want to find out more. We need to include a (safe) contact telephone number and address for people to follow up.

We need to be certain who we're aiming information at. Do we need more than one press release or leaflet for different people or groups?

## 2. **Knowing "the enemy"**

Who are what is "the enemy"? Are demonstrating against people or against beliefs and behaviours? We need to record and analyse Telethon and CIN to discover who is responsible for what. What is the transmission/programming style? Who is involved?

There are three main groups and the nature of their involvement differs. This affects how we raise objections and whether our tactics vary according to the group we're demonstrating to.

- The 'stars'

I have compiled a list of around 100 'stars' taking part in this year's CIN. Interestingly compared to previous years the event is attracting fewer 'stars' and those who are involved are increasingly people whose careers are most clearly shrinking. Rumour has it, however, that CIN provides the BBC with its top annual viewing figures, so these astral beings depend on the continuation of such events.

- 'Big business'

We need to compile a similar list of businesses who contribute a minuscule amount of their profit in return for cut-price advertising. Our publicity could include a rundown of these companies' Disability equality policies. Again, these events may be attracting less business involvement. Company-giving is declining over concerns at government under-funding.

But what about those people and organisations who no longer take part in Telethons/CINs? Why did they stop? And those people who have never taken part? Those who do not support the event for social & political reasons are potential allies.

I believe we are right to strongly criticise celebrity self-promotion and cheap business advertising. The third party involved in these events, however, needs a different approach.

- 'Ordinary people'

Unfortunately the previous two groups are frequently insulated from our protests. 'Ordinary people' receive the major impact. But they are also most likely to change allegiances because they have least to lose and most to gain.

Most people **feel** powerless and believe Telethon & CIN at last present an opportunity to do something constructive. Most people involved in these events are attempting to work for change. This is our opportunity to show people they do have power. We should welcome their phenomenal commitment of time, energy & will, and then help them to identify more effective ways of channeling that power.

Don't forget that the majority of adults in Britain support a proper Disability income (MORI). But they need to know what we want in order to support us. Direct action is **the** opportunity to convert the rest and confirm the converted. Our emphasis should not be on bull-doing people for contributing to our oppression, but on making time to discuss and increase awareness, education, and politicisation. We need to separate the different components of the event - fun, patronisation, and working for change - and to demonstrate they are not mutually dependent.

Politicisation is a painful process. People have to be forgiven for making mistakes and given the kind of support that we need/ed. I don't imagine that everyone there will be bathed in altruism, but we need to give people a chance.

Are we making it clear to people just what we **want** them to do? Do they know how to redirect their energies into supporting our campaign, lobbying MPs, etc. After demonstrators spent half-an-hour talking with one person outside BBC Centre he said, "A

while ago I was going to go in and support this. You've completely changed the way I'm thinking." He promised to telephone the television duty officer and register his complaint.

We need to remember that many people will be meeting a Disabled person for the first time (and there we are en masse!). It might grate but how we present ourselves makes a major impact. The self-advocating Disability equality trainer who makes time to discuss the issues can make a huge impact. People we meet may be or become Disabled. Do they have role models in us or do they remember only aggression, too easily dismissed as 'chips on shoulders'?

### 3. **Tactics**

#### i. **campaign philosophy**

For any and all of our campaigns we need to agree a basic philosophy. I'm assuming our work is:

- **Non-party** political

This does not mean our work is non-political, but that we do not align with Labour or Conservative or any other political party. We cannot maintain this claim if demonstrations include "Maggie Out" chants or placards.

- Non-violent

We do not use destructive force. Different people have different cut-off points for what constitutes violence, and different demonstrations may justify different techniques. I would advocate that we reject the use of both physical **and** verbal force. I believe aggression is far more likely to undermine our message, both because it leads to defensive reactions, and because it increases the risks of a demonstration becoming out of control.

Non-violence does not mean no anger. Anger is often the very thing that leads us to object in the first place. A demonstration is an appropriate place to express it, but does not have to be expressed through aggression.

- Direct action

We use collective effort to work for immediate change without waiting for parliamentary means. I believe direct action is vital to our movement. Mass protest gives us a buzz, makes change seem ever more possible and renews resolve.

#### ii. The issue in question

It may be difficult to keep issues separate. Most of us have a range of political allegiances, many of which are interrelated. However, the most effective demonstrations (ie. those that receive publicity and achieve change) are single-issue events. There will be many of us at demonstrations who are anti the primeminister or support an industrial strike, but unless they are **directly** relevant to this particular demonstration they need to be put aside.

### iii. The demonstration as part of a wider campaign

Direct action does not preclude combining demonstrations and more orthodox campaigning methods, such as lobbying MPs or equality training. A integrated approach is likely to be the most successful route to change.

We need to separate short-term and long-term goals. For any major event, such as Telethon, work needs to begin months in advance with a 'plan of campaign' detailing all that needs doing, delegating jobs, deciding deadlines, etc. Here are some of the things we could be doing, both before and after Telethon/CIN:

- Letter-writing

We need to target key people. We can approach 'stars', MPs, television bosses, etc, asking individuals to withdraw their support, and/or make public their non-support and join our campaign (on our terms). Letters can be followed up by telephone calls and/or visits, either to persuade them further or to confirm their allegiance with our campaign.

We can also target organisations. The ambulance workers' support of Telethon, for example, and their hostility towards us seemed like a kick in the teeth (especially after many of us had supported them a few months earlier). Should we raise with the ambulance union how & why we object? Might they oppose ambulance staff taking part in such a political event in uniform and as representatives of the ambulance service?

- Articles in newspapers, both national and local - the 'human interest' angle is often most salable, so what about ex-poster children putting forward our arguments?
- Using community media spots, national and local, radio and television - C4 'Comment' and 'Right to Reply', R4 'Feedback', BBC 'Open Space', etc
- Public seminars - presentation of the issues, debates, press conferences, etc
- Making contacts - journalists, Disabled people and allies with specific skills and resources, etc.

We need to make sure that both decision-making and work are shared more widely than

at present within the Disability movement.

Students unions and community action groups are an untapped national network of support. A Disabled woman at Reading Union is proposing that the executive declare its opposition to events like CIN and to follow that up with constructive action. Unions and SCA groups might provide us with practical assistance to set up events & mobilise demonstrators.

What about industrial unions' support? Union Disability sub-groups could be a starting point.

What about television workers? There are people in TV Centre who oppose CIN and all it represents. There is a lot of pressure to be involved or at the very least to keep quiet. Rumour (yet to be substantiated) has it that technicians are coerced into working on the event. Again, the unions might be able to help. TV workers may be able to provide 'insider information' to strengthen our arguments.

- Workshops, training and seminars for ourselves

We need to practice skills in demonstrating, lobbying, public relations, banner making, stewarding, consciousness-raising/ self-advocacy, etc. We need to revitalise the involvement of current Disability activists, increase our numbers and involve the 'next generation'.

#### iv. Demonstration ideas

Media coverage is most likely for extremes of event. This doesn't necessarily mean maximum arrests, as it can result from strongly aggressive **or** strongly celebratory/spectacular events.

People need to have fun, especially in a political climate like this. In the absence of much else, CIN exists to meet participants' needs as well as (theoretically) all the other 'disadvantaged' people. Our demonstrations can combine with our festivals to provide far more fun and celebration, and a particularly powerful way of converting people.

We can use music, mass singing, visual and sound spectacles, street theatre, wheelchair blockades, movement and dance blockades, theme events (colour, image, object, etc), paper-chains, balloons, streamers, poster graffiti...

By analysing Telethon and CIN events we may find we can adopt some of the less dubious characteristics both for our own use and to mimic their events. There may be ways of using celebrities, taking care to avoid non-Disabled celebrities speaking 'on our behalf' or receiving publicity at the expense of the protest.

## v. The event - logistics

We need to make a detailed plan of an event in advance. Whilst some improvisation may be necessary, the more the event is made up as we go along the more risk there is of losing control. A plan needs to include:

- Knowing the building or site - identifying all possible car and people entrances, noting hazards, deciding boundaries, surveying access including parking.
- Appointing adequate stewards, legal observers, interpreters, assistants, photographers, and first aider, with defined responsibilities and all clearly identifiable by demonstrators, public and police.
- Making first aid equipment, space blankets, hot drinks, shelter, emergency transport, and adequate lighting available, depending on the nature of the demonstration.
- Setting up 'telephone trees' so that information prior to the event can be rapidly relayed throughout the campaign.
- Deciding in advance how both stewards and police will be kept informed during the event.
- Making information on dealing with arrest more widely available.
- Learning about the legal implications. How many lawyers do we have as allies? Is it legal for us to be transported in police vans which have no means of securing wheelchairs?
- Thinking through risk-taking before the event. How do we protect/ support each other? A peace campaign set up 'affinity groups' of 12-15 people who kept in close contact throughout an event. Each group had a coordinating steward. In pre-event training they practised stress behaviour and discussed fears and needs. Demonstrators decided freely in advance whether or not to risk arrest and cooperated with the arrest procedure. Those deciding not to risk arrest took a support role, arranging childcare, solicitors, interpreters, etc. All members knew each others needs and offered mutual support and protection. Because each group was compact and was centrally coordinated the risk of 'outsiders' hijacking the event was minimised.

Currently we can get away with more than non-Disabled people at our demonstrations. In general, although certainly not all the time, the police are careful about how they move us and they avoid arresting us. For now, we can use this situation to our advantage, but this is unlikely to last. We need to decide what risks we are prepared and able to take.



- Written guidelines for demonstrating. The same peace campaign developed and pledged to follow a 'manual of behaviour'. The handbook set out aims, objectives and parameters for the campaign tactics and was made available to police and other authorities prior to an event.
- Predicting reactions of police, public and Telethon/CIN organisers and planning responses.

#### 4. A National Campaigns Resource?

Effective demonstrating is complex and time-consuming work. We need to find ways to amass skills and experience, avoid duplication of work, build a collection of recyclable props and equipment, compile an archive of press coverage, set up skill-sharing workshops, build up an index of contacts, and fund a concerted series of campaigns.

My overall suggestion is that we establish a national Campaigns Resource Centre. We already have the beginnings of a national fund for demonstrations, but perhaps we should be thinking wider.

A staffed resource centre could gather a wide range of expertise from Disability & other demonstrations, establishing:

- A central debating, information, equipment and funding point for affiliated individual campaigns such as the Campaign to Stop Patronage and the Campaign for Accessible Transport, whilst retaining overall independent status.
- A 'code of practice' for affiliated campaigns. This might set out the demonstration parameters, including specifying what is meant by non-violent direct action, and ensuring control of Disability demonstrations remains with Disabled people's organisations
- A Charter of Disability Rights for public release, to specify the issues and demands of the Disability movement, and obtaining pledges/signatures of support for our aims. This is the sort of package that gets good media coverage at a press launch and could form a strong core for additional campaigning.