

# Summer of 2012: Paralympic legacy and the welfare benefit scandal

Liz Crow

[liz@roaring-girl.com](mailto:liz@roaring-girl.com)

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**Abstract:** Through the summer of 2012, two opposing sets of images dominated the British press. Welfare benefits reform met the Paralympics, the former casting disabled people as scroungers, the latter as superhumans. Seemingly independent yet intertwined, the images have profound consequences for public perception of disability and the lives of disabled people. These are explored through one claimant's traversal of the benefits system against a heady backdrop of the Games. In exploring the images and their impact, the values that drive them are exposed, holding profound consequences for disabled people's campaigns and offering hope for an abiding legacy from the summer of 2012.

Through the summer of 2012, two opposing sets of images dominated the British press. Welfare benefits reform met the 2012 Paralympics, with consequences for public perception of disability and the lives of disabled people.

In this paper, I contrast the images and describe their recurring themes, discussing the meaning each brings to the other and examining their shaping of perceptions of disability. I trace their impact through my own traversal of the benefits system against as heady backdrop of the Games. Finally, I explore the deeper ramifications these images hold for us all.

**Warm up**

In the summer of 2012, the British press was preoccupied with two contrasting sets of images of disabled people. The first consisted of widespread images of disabled people as welfare benefits claimants, against a context of comprehensive benefits reform and a massive 30% cut from the national disability benefits budget (Edwards 2012).

Two interwoven strands rapidly emerged: fraudster and scrounger. The first portrays non-disabled people defrauding the state through benefits secured for non-existent impairment. They appear in family snapshots and grainy surveillance footage carrying out activities likely precluded by their alleged impairment: playing golf, digging gardens, on a rollercoaster.

Scrounger reporting, in contrast, focuses on “workshy” disabled people who “languish” on benefits in preference to work, shifting the gaze from non-disabled fraudster to disabled parasite. Specific offences are replaced by generalised reporting, while amorphous photographs modelled by actors portray scrounging as another version of fraud. Different types of benefits – ESA for those deemed “unfit” for work and DLA, whether employed or not, for defraying impairment and disability costs - are conflated, with all claimants subsumed within the scrounger epithet.

Negative coverage prompts hardening of public attitudes with an unprecedented two-thirds of the population believing benefits are so generous that they discourage job-seeking (Goulden 2012). Public estimates of fraud range from 50 to 70% (Briant et al 2011), as much as 230 times the Department for Work and Pension’s figure of 0.3% (DWP 2011).

The reporting is a narrative of criminality and moral bankruptcy. With government support (Newton Dunn 2012), *The Sun* launches a “crusade” to “Beat the Cheat”, providing a telephone line for readers to report on neighbours (Talsania 2012). In the five-years to 2010/11, *Daily Mail* coverage of disability benefits “cheats” increases five-fold. Across the press, of all political persuasions, articles portraying us as economic “burden” multiply, and pejorative language (skiver, cheat, feckless, and so on) rises (Briant et al 2011). The overriding message is

uncritical support for welfare reform, in an unambiguous account that portrays fraud as rampant and unites taxpayers, in a time of austerity, against a national threat.

The moral character of non-disabled fraudster and disabled scrounger are equally under suspicion, but neighbourly surveillance is not experienced equally. The fraudster has no identifiable impairment, so suspicion falls on those who do (was the wheelchair user seen walking? Did the person with the white stick cross the road unaided? Was the neighbour who said they are ill seen out shopping?) (Begg 2012). A single case of fraud is implied to incriminate all disabled people and, claimant or not, those whose impairments are visible are in the spotlight.

Disabled people feel the press message as a threat (Disability Rights UK 2012). Added to anxiety about benefits reform, is surveillance, misinterpretation, disenfranchisement and hostility (de Wolfe 2012) and a style of reporting that defames a community. At its extreme, an interview with the Minister for the DWP suggests we are responsible for the entire recession (Newton Dunn 2010).

In four years of financial crisis, I have watched the figures for hate crime against disabled people climb. Whilst some of this is due to increased reporting of hate crime to police authorities, alone it does not explain the scale of hypervigilance or animosity that many disabled people recount. By the summer of 2012, they have doubled and over half of us have experienced disability-targeted hostility, aggression or violence from a stranger (ComRes 2011). The scrounger rhetoric is a key player (Briant et al 2011). Hate crime researcher, Katharine Quarmby, writes: "If you have a group that is blamed for economic downturn, terrible things can happen to them" (2012 in Riley-Smith 2012 para.5).

Some seek to quell hostility by presenting a counter image: the disabled person as victim. In online newspaper comments pages, they reprise a contemporary version of traditional charity imagery, portraying us as defenceless and pitiable. And whilst it might lift immediate public opprobrium, to cast ourselves as vulnerable when hate crime is rising plays a dangerous game.

The second set of images emerges in the run up to London 2012 and could scarcely contrast more. The largest Paralympics ever, the most accessible and best attended in its 64 years (Topping 2012), is promoted and reported on an unprecedented scale: over 500 broadcast hours and the most widely reported print news (Journalisted 2012). It is a stark contrast, not only with the “drought” of previous Games (Golden 2003 para.3), but with the reporting on benefits taking place alongside. It is a celebratory reporting of disability on an exceptional magnitude, light to the dark of benefits, unremitting hostility converted to wholesale celebration.

As official broadcaster, and in keeping with government Paralympic legacy, Channel Four’s mission is to “[t]ransform the perception of disabled people in society”, (ODI 2011 4). Matching the Paralympic motto, “empowerment, inspiration, achievement”, in a shift from its rehabilitative roots to world-class athleticism, the International Paralympic Committee aims to use sport to contribute to “a better world for all people with a disability” (IPC 2011 in Purdue & Howe 2011 7). It presents, perhaps, an opportunity to reflect on “how far society has not come regarding disability” (Goggin & Newell 2000 para.1).

Media coverage is launched in an advertising campaign from Channel Four. “Meet the superhumans” becomes a Paralympic mantra, echoed across all media and emblazoned across a larger-than-life glossy photograph of athletes, sleek and streamlined: swimmer, cyclist, runner, wheelchair rugby player. Looking the viewer in the eye, they challenge them to dare to look back, dare to pity.

Once the Games are underway, a torrent of images appears of disabled people’s endurance and athleticism. Impairment is on view as never before in a matter-of-factness of visibility. Hesitant early reporting becomes increasingly assured, in an awed weave of sporting triumph and individual “overcoming”. As the medal count rises, disabled athletes are feted as heroes.

Top of the bill are the backstories of shark bite, railway tracks, terrorism and war (Lusher 2012, Lydall 2012). The “hierarchy of impairment” is reenacted. Foremost are

amputees with high technology prostheses. For spectators seduced by glamour, the transformative powers of technology make the apotheosis of superhuman.

Non-disabled audiences are initially absorbed by the athletes' impairments, but notice their focus shifts to sheer athleticism (BBC News 2012). The press comments on Ellie Simmonds, and other athletes: "she ceased to be a disabled person. She was simply a champion swimmer" (Phillips 2012 para.3). In a saturation of images, Games organisers and press predict these are images that can change attitudes forever (Moreton 2012).

At the closing ceremony the Games are heralded as having "lifted the cloud of limitation" (Coe 2012 in Collins 2012 para.1). The press ponders how extraordinary it is what, with determination, disabled people can do (Phillips 2012). The Paralympics spotlights a group who are at last "acceptable" to a broader society. For most disabled people, it will become an image to cleave to, for those who can.

### **Lighting the cauldron**

The two image sets – inspirational Paralympian and immoral claimant – could hardly be more different, yet have much in common. Replicating an ancient binary of disability, they are "positive" and "negative", a tale of extremes: overcoming and inspiring versus flawed, burdensome and tragic.

Except for their intensity, their core messages would be merely a modernisation of historic themes. However, unprecedented density and compressed timescales take them to new levels of influence. In isolation, Paralympic coverage is an extraordinarily affirmative departure from traditional representations, yet its image borders are permeable. For most Paralympians are also claimants, whose DLA defrays costs of impairment and discrimination (while some also receive out-of-work ESA). That benefits are crucial to their athletic aspirations (Toynbee 2012), is absent from the discourse of either image. Where Paralympians are made virtuous by implied self-sufficiency, other disabled people are absorbed into the scrounger rhetoric.

Despite their polarisation, both images tell a similar story: of individuals with impairments separated from social context. Whether Paralympic success or claimant immorality, the individual is portrayed as soaring or plummeting solely through intrinsic will.

In ignoring social influences – from discrimination and poverty to elite training and sustained investment – the press glorifies those who overcome disabling barriers (Hevey 1992 87), and admonishes the rest. The claimants' reflected shame raises the athletes' pedestal still higher, each image reinforcing the other.

Disabled people visiting Olympic Park refer to the “Paralympic bubble” (Gentleman 2012 title), with access and inclusion as we have never known before. Press reporting places the athletes in that same bubble, reassuring non-disabled audiences that “see... disability isn't so bad... Those athletes seem to be getting on just fine” (Shakespeare 2012 para.3). Coverage supports an illusion that any disabled person excelling ceases to be a disabled person at all. To be disabled, as all those eligible for disability benefits must be, is to preclude excellence. For athletes, it is as though impairment and disability have been “disappeared”.

Since the meaning of images is influenced by the context in which they are viewed (Sturken & Cartwright 2001 46), it shifts for different audiences. What it is (or is not) to be disabled is not fixed and Paralympic and benefits coverage changes in meaning according to audience concerns. Hence, the scrounger rhetoric meets approval from a population fearing that benefits fraud endangers national interests, but threatens those at risk of false accusation. For many, the Paralympics is a positive new viewing of disability, even as it undermines disabled people who cannot conform to its exacting standards.

Through Paralympian, fraudster and scrounger, or the counter depiction of victim, the images centre on individuals as both source and solution for barriers. With serious consequences for the real lives of disabled people, we face a barrage of images that reflects and bolsters government policy on austerity cuts and benefits reform.

As benefits reform pushes forward, it becomes clear that the changes incorporate the most serious flaws of the image sets. The classification system used to assess entitlement to

support also situates disabled people outside social context. Impairment indicates employability, without reference to discrimination, support or job availability. Classification has always been core to the welfare state, but this shift isolates claimants fully from their social context.

The Paralympics system of classification is administratively separate, whilst overlapping in philosophy, with both systems built upon a common image that accords with Paralympic representation. Quantifiable biomechanical descriptors, such as strength, flexibility and balance, are measured to allocate athletes fairly to competition, and to determine eligibility of claimants for financial assistance (Tweedy & Burke 2009, DWP 2012b).

For the Paralympians, the measures fit, broadly, the physicality of the athletes, whose impairments are generally quantifiable (amputations, visual impairment, restricted growth, etc) and who are being measured for quantifiable activity (power, endurance, etc). Indeed, athletes whose impairments do not fit this system may find themselves ineligible for International Paralympic Committee competition (IWRP 2011). Claimants, however, with typically more complex, hard-to-quantify impairments (chronic, fluctuating and life-limiting conditions, with qualities such as pain and fatigue) (DWP 2012a), struggle to fit mechanistic criteria, which equally fail to accommodate the range of generalised employment tasks. Based on an erroneous image of disability, benefits classification becomes unfit for purpose.

For those assessed, it is vital to match the assessor's "picture in the mind" of what it is to be disabled. If the prevailing image does not represent us, then we fall through the net. Classification influences athletes' medal chances; for the claimant, it determines our chances in life. The claimant deemed "fit for work" is not only without support, but subjected by the press to the charge of scrounger.

The "bubble" gives a distorted, simplistic view of impairment. Paralympians and claimants are viewed as bodily and socially equivalent, differences in outcome reduced to individual strengths and choices. In vastly different circumstances, the Paralympian is applauded, whilst the claimant is excoriated.

The image sets peddle a two-dimensional representation of disability. Since the human mind responds to “metaphorically grounded” meaning (Tyler 1987 Lakoff & Johnson 1980 in Pink 2007 32), their over-simplification converts readily to a symbol of what it is to be disabled. Ceasing to focus on the individuals portrayed - “this” claimant or “this” athlete – the images become a commentary on all disabled people. Lodging n the mind, they become “the heroic Paralympian...and the burdensome gimp” (Peers 2009 654), in a shorthand of values and judgement.

For disabled people, our public identities become limited to scrounger and fraud, victim or hero. Somewhere between, in the invisible gulf, is the space most of us inhabit.

Since most of the population claims to have little contact with disabled people (ComRes 2010), the invisible majority remains unseen. Inclusive education, with disabled and non-disabled children learning together, would be a clear means of instilling images of disability based in reality (Dyson et al 2004). In its absence, non-disabled people’s primary source of meaning is the cultural media (Barnes et al 1999 in Goggin & Newell 2000), which teaches culturally acceptable ways to make sense of their surroundings (Gilman 1982 in Garland-Thomson 2001). In the absence of compelling, sustained alternatives, an under-informed audience takes its lead from the dominant rhetoric<sup>1</sup>. Paralympics and benefits imagery holds the power to create a collective imagining of what a disabled person might be.

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<sup>1</sup> Newspaper circulation figures (August 2012) show sales for the most extreme proponents of benefits rhetoric, *The Sun* and *Daily Mail*, of 4,416,817 (though their front page headlines reach many more through newsstands and online). This is over 15 times the sales (n = 286,075) of primary counter reporters, *The Guardian* and *The Independent* (ABC 2012).

In casting disabled people as “other”, the images set disabled people apart (Stanton 1996). Repeated references to “we”, the taxpayer, “they”, the claimant, to “they”, the superhumans, “we”, the ordinary mortals, drive a wedge between disabled people and the rest.

The power of images to shape a community’s perception is well known from another more sinister era. Paralympic imagery carries a trace of *Olympia*, Leni Riefenstahl film of the 1936 Berlin Olympics, with its commanding aesthetic of an idealised physical type (Viggiano 2011). Simultaneously, National Socialist Party images portrayed disabled people as economic burden, readying the citizenry for a programme of mass-murder that decimated the disabled population (Crow 2010). Contemporary benefits coverage is charged with this same discourse. For National Socialists, the body’s state mirrors that of the mind (Mosse 1996 in Viggiano 2011 5) so that, just as with Paralympic and benefits images, the body comes to indicate an individual’s moral character.

Consistently presenting disabled people as other than we are, these images leave us caught in the invisible gulf, yet simultaneously exposed to their crossfire. Any group made symbolically more alien, ever less able to conform, is made vulnerable to hostility and hate. In a public interrogation of who to blame for the cuts, this is the most dangerous of places to be.

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Sitting in the Games, I *want* to enjoy, wholeheartedly. I want to revel in the visibility of my community, the absolute naturalness of seeing them there, at home in the public wearing of their bodies.

Entering the aquatics centre through functional spaces, I pass through doors which open to light and height and blue. A third up from the pool, with dizzying tiers climbing sharp behind me, I am placed for the perfect view, the water a sheet of glass, empty, enticing, waiting.

To cheers that roll and echo through the stadium, the swimmers take their marks. I see the gathering clouds, the collision up ahead. At the swimming, the athletes are waving whilst I drown.

## Let the Games Begin

The brown envelopes, every time, set my heart thudding, announcing I must make public all that is most private, to be raked over by bureaucrats with images in their minds of people like me.

It is the brown envelopes that spill news that my impairment of years, and all discrimination with it, has been disappeared, that, suddenly, through a peculiar logic of classification, I am found well enough to prepare for paid work I will never do.

It is the same brown envelopes that herald the months of waiting, of solicitors and evidence and tribunals, for a crime that isn't mine. I feel I have the wrong impairment, but it is the system that is broken.

In the newspapers, I am feckless, cheating, scrounging, languishing. You would never know that benefits are the safety net that anyone who has ever worked for money has already paid towards. Entitlement is forgotten and an assumption of guilt built into the system. I read that we all know someone who cheats in a world I do not recognise. But when *The Sun* launches its "Beat the Cheat" hotline, provoking neighbour to report on neighbour, I make sure to close the blinds before I walk across the room.

I should perhaps turn my fury to the fraudsters, except that, when my own claim fails, the newspapers have primed the public to believe that I am one too. The fraudsters are not the only ones who tell tales.

Statistics tell that 299 of us on ESA are reassessed for every case of fraud (DWP 2011). I have a creeping sense that we are not just dispensable, but too costly, taking up space that belongs to others. We have been dubbed "useless eaters" before, in another more lethal era.

At the supermarket, I notice I am holding myself differently: alert, vigilant. I sit taller and smile wider at strangers because now it seems safer that way. I act almost Paralympian, even as I am not, even as it betrays others who cannot do the same, even as I return home to

recover energy I could never afford to waste. I go out even less, become aware of lying low in a self-imposed, protective invisibility.

It is the news of people dying<sup>2</sup> that steals my breath: people found “fit for work” and dying, wronged, people who short-circuit the process in the most final and desperate way. It is my ten-year old, filled with life and justice, who gets it right. “It’s like the witches,” she says: well enough to survive the whole bitter process and you cannot truly be disabled; to prove you are, surely you must die in the doing of it. It is true that I am now too ill to be ill.

Ministers tweak the system to assuage difficult questions, and send guidelines to jobcentre staff on how to deal with suicide threats (Domokos 2011), while the death toll continues to rise. We have become canaries down the mines, revealing a system that has become too toxic. As the Paralympics draws closer, I feel I shall implode.

The Opening Ceremony broadcasts to a billion-figure audience, and I recline upon my sofa to draft a defence for my forthcoming tribunal. In the background, disabled artists perform a high wire act.

The Games begin and every political agenda collides, as if a collective holding of breath is all at once released in a perfect storm.

If there is a single symbol of the storm, it is Atos, so heavily criticised for its role in applying the new process of assessment. In “doing the dirty work of the DWP”, Atos becomes both architect and symbol of welfare reform. As a primary sponsor of the Games, their logo is brazen on lanyards around the neck of every athlete. “It makes sense,” says comedian Mark Steel, “in the way that if you had a gay Olympics, you'd get it sponsored by the Pope” (Steel 2012 para.1). The Paralympic authorities defend their excellent relationship with their sponsors and the athletes, with a few heroic exceptions, hold their contractual silence.

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<sup>2</sup> A Freedom of Information (FOI) request identified a death rate of 32 per week amongst claimants found “fit for work” by benefits assessors (Sommerlad 2012).

Athletes are fêted as heroes, celebrated for determination and resilience. The press choruses approval and the tabloids reaffirm a conviction that the rest are cheats and scroungers, shouting the news with energy renewed. The countering message of victim sends chills down my spine. Each and every image makes failure a part of the deal. The athletes' own benefits assessments are officially postponed until after the Games and I wonder what awaits them, out of uniform and back to looking like the rest of us. Yet, still, surveying all the options, I yearn to be a Paralympian. If they are superhumans, then where does that leave the rest of us? I find I have prosthesis envy.

Protesters take to streets and keyboards with terrier determination. The newspapers wonder provocatively that they can be well enough to protest and yet ill enough to claim, never grasping that they are fighting for their lives. On comments pages, on Facebook and in tweets, there is mounting turbulence, a people's despair cloaked in fury that spits and spews onto the screen. It is a two-week "window" to create another image that will communicate, galvanise, and give courage.

Disabled People Against the Cuts takes its "Closing Atos Ceremony" to the DWP (DPAC 2012), hundreds of people filling the pavements outside with chants and banners, solidarity and resolve in images that "talk back" (Garland-Thomsom 2009 193) to those who would do us harm. Watching webcam footage, I revel in the visibility of my community, in the public wearing of their bodies and their rage. I know my heroes.

Inside Olympic Park, spectator-activists cover up Atos logos and deface the occasional lanyard (Pring 2012). I take my own small protest to the swimming, wearing a black armband of mourning telling that "Atos Kills". Deep inside, I long to stretch out in the Olympic blue of water.

In a ratings bid, the government adopts the Paralympics; it is a popularity contest for us all. In shaking a hand, presenting a medal, with a well-placed volley at those who disappoint, they confirm in the minds of many that there are those who inspire and others who scrounge. But I rally at the Chancellor's appearance, presenting a medal to the accompaniment of boos, a

crowded stadium united in an aural Mexican wave (Channel 4 2012). “Why did 80,000 people boo George Osborne? Because they couldn’t fit any more in the stadium.” That night, it is my sweetest sleep in months.

On the street, there is a sea change. My electric trike draws admiration as never before. Strangers ask what sport I do, but faces fall as I am found wanting, though there’s no more likelihood of my being a Hannah Cockcroft or a Richard Whitehead than there is of these ill-equipped strangers becoming Jessica Ennis or Mo Farah. A man wants to know why my chair is battery-powered when there are “much worse” who push themselves, am I lazy or what?

Back home, in the bosom of my family, watching the Games on television, we play impairment lotto. All those who overplay the inspirational card are struck instantly and for life from all benefits.

The protests continue nationwide with phone jamming and banners unfurled. A coffin filled with messages is delivered to Atos; each note describes a disabled person’s experience at the hands of Atos assessors, in a memorial to those who have died (The Void 2012). And, at last, after more than two years’ lobbying, we see the first critical shift in the press.

And perhaps this is the favour the Paralympics – even Atos – have done. Perhaps *this* is where perceptions can be “transformed”, for they have given us a hook to lever a different kind of attention from the press.

Deep in the pages of *The Guardian* and *Independent*, even occasionally a lone stalwart in the *Daily Mail*, there begins another reporting. A small voice next to the tabloid screech, but a voice that might be heard, might start to turn a tide. Never yet shouting from the front page, nonetheless a door has opened to a torrent: the whistleblower pressured to misclassify claimants as fit for work (Brown 2012), the vast numbers of decisions overturned at tribunal (Grayling 2012), the Atos doctors and nurses reported for professional misconduct (Lakhani 2012), the exposure of targets for removing people from disability benefits (Long 2012), the 90,000 accessible vehicles forecast to be repossessed (Toynbee 2012), the government’s threatened sanctions for disabled people who cannot comply with work-related instructions (Malik 2012),

the 43% deemed too well for disability benefits, but too ill for work, vanishing from the records (Clarke 2012), the prolonged stress, needless deaths and suicides (Sommerlad 2012, Wachman & Wright 2012). An economist confirms disabled people as “the hardest hit” (Edwards 2012). Truly we are collateral damage in this war of cuts.

On an online forum, I read of the ex-con, guilty of embezzlement, offering to represent claimants at tribunal for a one-off payment (Toolbox 2011), but he’s scarcely more than a speck in the layers of deception.

I stumble upon the name of Unum, the US insurance company, advising the DWP in the design its benefits assessment system. I read of their consultative role through successive British governments (Private Eye 2011), simultaneous with their labelling as an “outlaw company”, found guilty of denying multiple thousands of disability insurance claims (Mundy 2011). I read of their claims-denial quotas and instructions to falsify medical assessment records (Jolly 2012a). I read of the role of Atos in devising the assessment system, of the Diploma in Disability Assessment Medicine they run for healthcare workers subsequently deemed qualified to assess claimants (FOM 2012), “disappearing” their impairments in a carbon copy of the process that saw Unum prosecuted (Kohn 2009). I read that Unum’s medical officer moved to become chief medical officer at Atos (Private Eye 2011), and of Cardiff University’s Centre for Psychosocial and Disability Research, with funds from Unum and a head from the DWP (Jolly 2012a), who have rewritten the biopsychosocial model for the purposes of benefits reform, privileging psychological factors to besmirch sick and disabled people as trapped in unemployment by their own lack of motivation (Jolly 2012b) whilst intoning that “work will set you free” (Jolly 2012a).

I read more than is good for me and layers of globalised interests and corruption, of greed and human dispensability, conspire in a weight of obscenity which dizzies down to a picture of me, pen in hand, as I place careful words on paper in defence of my future.

Meanwhile, the government announces it has hardly *begun* on its plans for benefits reform. I quake in my boots at what lies ahead.

In *The Washington Post*, a photograph (Morenatti 2012) shows a protester sobbing, distress etched upon his face. Back home, I shed my own dark tears.

As I hurtle towards my tribunal, I am reduced to exposing my scars for public viewing. In this brave new world of benefits reforms, the assessment sets out to demonstrate what we can *do* (Grayling 2011). Surely, it is born of a Paralympic ethos. But when my impairment is made to vanish, my appeal relies upon my cataloguing and parading all that I *cannot*. With no facility for cataloguing the effects of discrimination, I can only present *myself* as “unfit”.

The cost, the trauma, the reason people are killing themselves, is beyond assessments, beyond money, beyond tribunals; the cost is in what they represent. For who says I cannot work? Only that I cannot in this narrowed way of doing it. In a system where work is required to be consistent, predictable, regular and sustained, then I cannot work, which is not the same as saying I am unfit for work. It is that there is no room for my way of working, of contributing. In a system that holds work as the indicator of a person’s worth, then I am, by default, of no worth. How did value come to be measured in such restrictive terms? Do I only contribute when I earn? Why do I not earn when I contribute? It is a stripping of self.

I have no option but to fight for benefits, for myself and others. But this is short term survival, clinging to the ghosts of autonomy, nothing more; it challenges nothing, leaves everything that is wrong untouched. Over the course of decades, I have built a life despite, *to* spite, all illness and discrimination. Finer than gossamer, it allows me to be *me*. Now, that meticulously crafted, oh-so-fragile security is trampled and my finite health is to be spent defending the threads that remain.

And in that moment before I hit rock bottom, before there can be no turning back, I realise how I am caught. To survive, I must deny all that I am, all that I have done, all that I might be. In order to get the financial support I need, I must fight to be written off in a system that is broken. This is the unspoken pact.

So now I know.

I almost lost myself the other day, but I am back, battered and exhausted, and ready to

answer back.

## **Legacy**

The Paralympics have “lifted the cloud of limitation,” says London 2012 Chair Lord Coe (Collins 2012 para.1). I wonder next morning how other disabled people feel waking to grey skies.

In the immediate aftermath of the storm is a sense of hiatus. The athletes return to homecoming parades, a brief hush descends upon the political machine, and activists give way to exhaustion for a while. It is a time to take stock.

The first ever “Legacy Games” (DCMS 2012 8) has been a collision of images. A small glimmer for those who can match the abiding images of the Games, they threaten a heavy backlash for the rest. And as the Paralympic fanfare ebbs away, the benefits juggernaut roars on.

Legacy is a mercurial thing that sometimes must divert from its intended path. The Paralympics could have provided a platform for athletes and activists to communicate a more truthful representation of contemporary disabled people’s lives (Purdue & Howe 2011). In the absence of that, I wonder can we seize the opening to shape an alternative of our own?

In this moment, it is benefits reform that many of us must fight. By sheer necessity, by principle and solidarity, we support each other in a battle for survival which depends, not on evidencing need, but on fulfilling “a picture in the mind” of what it is to be us.

It is a picture nourished and reinforced by a “long campaign of misinformation”, uncorrected and indeed, fed, by government briefings that have fuelled the rise in hostility towards disabled people (Quarmby 2012 para.7).

Individual benefits victories and grudging policy concessions can be no more than a legacy of the short term, a reaction to crisis. Austerity, in its justification of welfare cuts, reporting bias, and of bending ourselves to fit, is a shield which diverts from deeper questioning of what lies *beneath*.

For immersed within the name-calling of superhuman/fraudster/scrounger/victim, lies an unease of greater magnitude, a resounding message of the social value placed upon disabled people. The images, in their polarisation, are symbols not only of mythic disability, but of what we as a society value and abhor. As emblem, the Paralympic superhuman has found its converse in disabled person as subhuman.

These are the values built into this benefits reform, in its assault upon disabled people's futures and its relentless advance even as the deaths accumulate. It is these values that greet reform with widespread public support and an accompanying rise in hate. It is the same values behind other justifications: segregated education and threats to independent living, selective foetal screening for impairment and the rush to legal rights for assisted suicide.

It is a set of values that connects our every campaign so that, to make effective change on one issue requires that we address them all. They are values rooted in history, yet experienced by contemporary disabled people as a daily threat. Beneath the benefits rhetoric, is a challenge of "our right to inhabit this planet, our right to exist" (Bashell 2012 1h 33').

Simply to create alternative images – of "ordinary" disabled people between the extremes, of people who work and play, run homes, raise children, and so on – is not enough. They are a partial view, of disabled people able to conform, but which allow to continue, untouched, the values that confine those in the invisible gulf.

A predicted shift in press reporting on benefits, from the language of accusation to stories of reemployment success (d'Ancona 2012) suggests that images of "ordinary" disabled people may become commonplace. However, it is a shift that continues to sell the rightness of reforms whilst concealing their impact upon those who fall through the gaps. Just as surely as the more provocative image sets, these are images reinforce resentment towards those who cannot conform.

Instead, we need counter images from an agenda of our own: a reversal of the spotlight, "naming and shaming" those who do us harm, and telling a different story that shows what those who cannot conform can be in a system that treasures diversity. It is not that people like us

do not exist, but that we do not appear in the public gaze. To challenge the prevailing images through “visual activism” (Garland-Thomsom 2009 193) is to produce images from out of the invisible gulf.

But we need to look deeper still. For behind the notion of disabled people as less, is a further layer of values that reveres productivity and self-sufficiency. For those who do not, or cannot, conform, their social value is diminished. What do these values mean for people kept from the workforce by discrimination? Or who cannot work because notions of work are so constrained? Or who are too ill to contribute in any endorsed way? We are left with no representation capable of reflecting dignity back to ourselves or demonstrating that we are of worth.

In the final analysis, the image sets, and the structures built in their likeness, tell us little about disabled people and more about their non-disabled producers. They comment on the misinterpretation of what it is to be disabled and the function that disability can serve within a society. They combine in a metaphor for hope and warning: the Paralympians symbolising a “triumph of the will” over harsh times, the claimants simultaneously providing a scapegoat and a rung on the ladder lower yet than our own.

In austerity, with unemployment climbing, the force of the images is magnified, even amongst those who previously felt immune. The values that impact on many disabled people now confront others too. In the face off between “do as you would be done by” and “every man for himself” (Morris 2012 18’) lies the biggest battle of all, far beyond benefits reforms or cutbacks and on to the prevailing ideology that drives them (Williams 2012). It denigrates and disenfranchises all who do not conform. The message in these images defines disabled people’s life chances, but confines us all. Yet, for every one of us who does not conform, we shake it to its roots.

So here is an alternative for an abiding legacy. Beyond digging in, for those of us who have to and those who chose to align with us, is the possibility of showing *another* way. It questions both the imperative to conform and the shape of the mould. It is a possibility of

imagining and demonstrating different ways of being, versions of ourselves that are as radically diverse as we are or need to be. It is a hope that in saying at every turn “we can do this better”, we might nudge towards a system that incorporates and includes, in a re-reckoning of what makes any of us, disabled or not, human.

In the onslaught of the images, campaigners and protesters, disabled people and allies, have shown what we can be in the most compelling picture of all. Away from the public gaze, in a relentless defence of protecting a community, there have been skills and strategies amassed, abiding compassion, organisation and resilience on a scale to move mountains. It is a different kind of productivity. There has been imagination and humour, alliances built, agendas shaped, the bearing of witness and feeding of courage. Fears have been allowed and defeat rejected. And, at the core, has been a refusal to comply, a gathering pride in answering back and a quiet knowing that it is not we who are wrong. From out of the invisible gulf, our response to events is what defines us.

The summer of 2012 saw the perfect storm. And here is our legacy: to question the way things are and to show better ways of being in the world. It is another version of heroism, entirely visible if only people think to look.

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