

## 7 Disabled citizens and the neoliberal turn in Britain

Whose rights and whose responsibilities?

*Monika Baár*

### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The phenomenon commonly labelled as the neoliberal turn represented a key transitional moment in the history of the welfare states in Europe and beyond. It revealed both certain common characteristics and peculiarities confined to a number of individual states. This chapter reflects on the repercussions of this shift from the perspective of disabled people in Britain, where it coincided with the rise to power of Margaret Thatcher's conservative government in 1979. On the one hand, this period became associated with serious cuts in the welfare budget and the fundamental reshaping of the welfare landscape. These measures were justified ideologically as a means to "responsibilize" citizens, while in pragmatic terms they were justified by pointing to the circumstances dictated by the financial crisis. On the other hand, this era was characterized by an upsurge in disabled people's grassroots activities. This intensification of bottom-up activities owed not merely to domestic dynamics, but also resonated with international developments.

One such crucial event was the United Nations' International Year of Disabled Persons (in Britain usually referred to as International Year of Disabled People and in abbreviated form as IYDP), which was observed worldwide in 1981 with the aim to promote the rights of persons with disabilities and enable their integration into the mainstream of society. This chapter seeks to add new angles to recent insightful studies on the development of disability-related welfare policies in Britain in the post-war period and in particular on the neoliberal turn by placing the intensified discussions around the International Year and their repercussions at its centre. Using the International Year as its lens, it reveals that the late 1970s to early 1980s represented a compressed period during which epochal transformations took place: it was marked by the termination of the post-war welfare consensus, to which earlier British governments had committed themselves at the rhetorical level.

The Thatcher government expected that citizens, having benefited from the earlier welfare expansion, would now be ready to accept sacrifices. Yet, disabled people had been overlooked in the post-war British welfare settlement and this "benign neglect" made them reluctant to accept the rolling back of the state which had never rolled forward for them in the first place. They also found it ironic that a year which was dedicated to their cause brought about worsening living standards and restrictions on the already not too extensive service provision. This dissatisfaction

catalysed the formation of new types of grassroots organizations which focused not only on services but also on rights, and adopted a more critical and confrontational approach that explicitly challenged the status quo. This transformation can also be traced in the change of the official title of the year, which was originally planned to be the International Year *for* Disabled People. The charitable connotations of this label, however, triggered a negative reaction from the target group and consequently, the initial designation was subsequently changed to the International Year *of* Disabled People. This shift indicated a move in the public discourses away from the mainstream charitable–medical approach towards a more socio-economic understanding of disability.

The chapter demonstrates that both the representatives of the disability rights movement and the representatives of the neoliberal state argued for a greater degree of autonomy and independence for citizens. For disabled people this crystallized, among other things, around two concepts: the right to work and independent living, both to be realized with appropriate supporting frameworks. These two desiderata did not merely provide the preconditions for self-sufficiency, but also constituted a key dimension of political autonomy. By contrast, in the neoliberal “version,” the intention was reduced to individual employment and personal care, without the expectation to simultaneously support societal participation. In other words, the neoliberal state co-opted the disability movement’s demands in a de-collectivized version and, as a consequence, it also removed any implications of social justice from those agendas.<sup>2</sup>

Conventional analyses of the welfare state have typically been based on government and policy documents, but recently academic debates have become invigorated by having recourse to the rich, albeit often uncategorized, holdings of the archives of voluntary associations. Another enriching factor has been the employment of the biographical approach, which utilizes the lived experience for exploring the intersections between the public sphere and private lives and interrogating the agency of disabled citizens.<sup>3</sup> Seeking to build on these new directions whenever possible, this study investigates and confronts the role of the state, the contribution of grassroots organizations, the media and selected individuals. In terms of source material, this chapter draws on the hitherto unexplored archival records of the Secretariat of the International Year of Disabled Persons held in the University of Liverpool Special Collections & Archives.<sup>4</sup> Following consultations between the government and leading voluntary organizations in late 1978, the Secretariat was organized by the National Council for Voluntary Organizations. In addition, the chapter utilizes a range of “grey materials” – leaflets, pamphlets, newsletters of voluntary organizations – many of which are available in the virtual Disability Archive UK maintained by the Centre for Disability Studies at Leeds University; and interviews with activists which have been published in lesser-known outlets.

### **Antecedents: the British welfare state and disability**

As recently produced excellent studies, such as those undertaken by Jameel Hampton and Gareth Millward, have demonstrated, just as in several other European

countries, in Britain the post-war welfare settlement had failed to accommodate disabled people within its cradle-to-the-grave provision. Governments consistently drew a sharp distinction between people whose disability had occurred from war – or industrial injuries – and the “rest.” Those belonging to the latter category, implicitly perceived as “moral failures,” were excluded from social citizenship and remained heavily reliant on non-statutory provision. Consequently, they were greatly exposed to poverty and exclusion. As one critique noted, the welfare state acted as “the ambulance waiting at the bottom of the cliff” for those in an acute financial status, rather than creating conditions which prevented impoverishment in the first place.<sup>5</sup>

It was this marginalized position which organizations such as the Spastics Society, the National Association for Mental Health (nowadays known as Mind) and the National Association of Parents of Backward Children (nowadays known as Mencap) sought to address with their activities and services. In the 1960s and 1970s, a number of new organizations came into being which operated with novel approaches and strategies. In 1965 two housewives, Megan du Boisson and Berit Moore, established the Disablement Income Group (DIG) whose goal was to tackle the problem of poverty. They fought for the introduction of a comprehensive statutory income for disabled people, which was to be based on the severity of their condition, irrespective of the cause of their disablement, marital status and age. As their memorandum of 1965 stated: “Disability should not be regarded as short term sickness indefinitely prolonged, but as a category of being for which special provision must be made.”<sup>6</sup> DIG therefore contributed to the emergence of the notion of “civilian disability” as a category and as an object of policy. Britain’s entry into the European Economic Community gave DIG members the opportunity to exert further pressure on the government by comparing British social policy unfavourably to those of other countries in the Community. For example, British disability policies needed to be revised in light of the European Council directive on equal treatment of men and women because they were found to be discriminating against disabled married women, whose position in the social security system was described by Barbara Castle as “second class citizens entitled to third-class benefits.”<sup>7</sup>

Another organization that campaigned for the introduction of a comprehensive income scheme was Disability Alliance (DA), a federation comprising 70 institutions. It was founded in 1974 in reaction to the White Paper issued in 1974 titled “Social Security Provision for Chronically Sick and Disabled People.” As one member later recalled, they were “united in fury” realizing that in the document the desired non-statutory allowance was relinquished altogether.<sup>8</sup> Unlike traditional charities, DIG and DA did not focus on one specific type of impairment (for example blindness or physical impairment); they were pan-disability organizations. They lobbied the government employing “insider tactics”: this entailed forging close relations with influential officials and presenting them with a sound evidence base. Nevertheless, successive Labour governments throughout the 1970s rejected the target of a general allowance for disabled people with the excuse that it was incompatible with the contributory principle of National

Insurance. Although the morally justified nature of disability benefits was not called into question, they were considered legitimate only as long as they did not place an unreasonable financial burden on the state.<sup>9</sup>

Different attitudes towards priorities, membership and strategies could and did lead to frictions even among organizations fighting for the same fundamental goals. For example, the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) emerged on the scene in 1974 out of a frustration: its founders Vic Finkelstein and Paul Hunt protested in this way against what they believed was DIG's "colonization" by professional academics. UPIAS (of which more later) campaigned for independent living and direct payments which could allow disabled people to take control over their own finances and live according to their own life schedules rather than according to the rigid frameworks imposed on them by inflexible statutory services.

Welfare expenditure in Britain saw a reduction from the 1970s onwards, which can be attributed to a great extent to the worldwide financial crisis. Yet, with the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979, this retrenchment also acquired a sound ideological basis. One of the fundamental tenets of the neoliberal turn was the emphasis on obligation over rights: "citizenship of entitlement" was to be replaced by "citizenship of contribution."<sup>10</sup> Along these lines, the Tory government relinquished the idea to develop comprehensive, state-led initiatives to address the problem of poverty. Its intention was not to abolish the welfare state, rather, to marginalize its relevance for the all but the poorest segments of society, for whom it was still expected to act a safety net. The government reduced service provision in the belief that it encouraged welfare dependency and impeded economic growth. Hence, the new policy supported profit-driven private providers, and instead of thinking in broader terms of societal protection, they focused on the individual rights of customers. The emphasis on the virtue of self-help and the push towards market-based provision thus became pivotal constituents of Thatcher's moralistic-individualist policies.<sup>11</sup>

### **The official response: charitable action and "we have to do something"**

It was in this tensed climate that amid much fanfare the International Year was launched in Britain in January 1981. The official contribution entailed declarations, reactions and activities in multifarious spheres and by a host of actors: the royal family, the government, political leaders, the media and a number of established charities which enjoyed a certain degree of approval and/or sponsorship by the government. A Central Committee was established to coordinate the response of the central government, and, as in the majority of United Nations member states, an IYDP Secretariat was also created with branches in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The government expected, however, that the main response to the International Year should come from the voluntary and private sectors.<sup>12</sup> The IYPD Committee therefore reached the decision that it would not engage in fundraising. Instead, the charities and voluntary organizations were

expected to increase their fundraising capacities.<sup>13</sup> Of the members of the royal family, the Queen, Prince Charles and the spouse of Princess Margaret, the Earl of Snowdon, became involved in the International Year. Cherishing the legacy of the Commonwealth, the IYPD Committee of New Zealand requested the Queen to dedicate her Christmas Speech of 1981 to the International Year. As a significant gesture on her part, the Queen accepted this request, as the following fragment from her speech demonstrates:

Last July we had the joy of seeing our eldest son married amid scenes of great happiness, which made 1981 a very special year for us. The wonderful response the wedding evoked was very moving. Just before that there had been a very different scene here in the garden at Buckingham Palace when three and a half thousand disabled people, with their families, came to tea with us. [...] The International Year of Disabled People has performed a very real service by focusing our attention on their problems. We have all become more aware of them and I'm sure that many of you, like myself, have been impressed by the courage they show. [...] Their courage in handling their difficulties and in many cases living an almost normal life, or making abnormal life normal, shows our own problems to be insignificant in comparison. [...] We have seen in 1981 how many individuals have devoted themselves to trying to make life more tolerable for handicapped people, by giving loving care and by providing money and effort to improve facilities and to hasten research.<sup>14</sup>

This speech was a quintessential manifestation of the conventional charitable approach to disabled people: it implied that “us” (the able-bodied) and “them” (the disabled) represented two entirely different worlds, and it expressed some pity towards those “unfortunate people” belonging to the latter category. Moreover, in a typical fashion, it showered praise on those who displayed courage and succeeded in overcoming their difficulties. The event itself mentioned in the speech – afternoon tea – likewise fit into the conventional charitable templates. The patron of the International Year was the Queen’s son, Prince Charles, whose wedding happened to take place in 1981, and so the wedding also became a site of charitable activities. For example, the sale of souvenirs at the royal wedding was offered for charity purposes and some of the wedding presents were in fact donations to charities involved in the International Year. A further connection to the royal family was forged through the appointment of Antony Armstrong-Jones, the Earl of Snowdon, as the International Year’s president for England and making him the chair of a special committee bearing his name. Snowdon had contracted polio at the age of 16, which motivated him to engage in disability campaigning. Nevertheless, the remit of the Snowdon Committee did not entail the addressing of concrete problems. Rather, it operated as a kind of “popular tribunal” that received an extraordinarily large number of letters. This indicated that many disabled people did not know where to turn with their problems.<sup>15</sup> Virtually all the letters received a standard reply, including, for example, the one written by

the Ladies' Committee of the Help Action Research for the Crippled Child. This letter extended an invitation to Lord Snowdon to undertake a portrait sitting. The Ladies' Committee's plan was that the completed portrait would be offered to the highest bidder and the income would be used for charitable purposes. However, the plan did not materialize: "I am afraid Lord Snowdon is not able to accept this kind invitation. Normally, Lord Snowdon would answer your kind letter personally but due to the quite overwhelming amount of correspondence he has receiving concerning the International Year he is unable to do so. If there is a concrete problem they pass it onto the authorities."<sup>16</sup>

Discussions in Parliament revolving around the International Year were undertaken by the political parties, the All-Party Disablement Group, and a number of MPs also expressed special interest. The All-Party Group reminded both parties of the promises that they had made in their run-up for the elections in 1979 in their respective manifestos. Conservatives declared: "Our aim is to provide a coherent system of cash benefits to meet the costs of disability, so that more people can support themselves and live normal lives," whereas Labour promised to "introduce a new disablement allowance to include the blind, varying according the severity of disablement."<sup>17</sup> The All-Party Group called attention to the confusing and inequitable nature of the existing system of benefits, which were based on the cause of the disability rather than need. The All-Party Group reminded its peers and the public that improving the system was not a party-political issue. The All-Party Group proposed a campaign for a comprehensive disability income scheme, but not with short-term effect, rather to be implemented "*when the economic situation improves.*"<sup>18</sup>

While fundamental improvements with immediate effect were ruled out in this way, there existed consensus among politicians that it would be an embarrassment for a prosperous country not to do *something*. In 1981 the liberal MP Lord Winstanley delivered a speech during the parliamentary debates which commenced with the following words:

My Lords, in my view Britain leads the world at talking about the disabled, though I am bound to say that the Americans come fairly close. Perhaps we lead the world in understanding the social, economic and political needs of the disabled. But do we lead the world in what we actually do? I very much hope that the international year will prove to be a year, not in which we talk a lot more about the disabled but in which we do something.<sup>19</sup>

The government's intention "to do something" became manifest in its rushing through the Disabled Persons Act 1981, which focused on the problem of access in a particularly narrow way. As Alf Morris, a disability campaigner and Britain's first Minister for Disabled People (from 1974 to 1979), noted in the *Sunday Times*: "the act not only had its teeth removed, but its gums as well."<sup>20</sup> Another manifestation of the "we have to do something on the cheap" mentality was the redefinition – in fact narrowing – of the focus of the International Year from full participation and equality to two issues: improving access and

changing attitudes. Regarding the former objective, the minute book of the IYDP Committee stated, "Far more could be done, particularly to improve access. At Leeds Castle, for example, the Trustees have succeeded in opening up many more parts of the Castle and its grounds for disable people, without having to spend too much money."<sup>21</sup> Regarding the latter objective, educational campaigns aimed at improving attitudes were launched. For example, a national poster campaign was mounted with the motto: "Do disabled people make you feel uncomfortable? If so, their greatest handicap could be you and your attitude. So, think of the person. Not the disability."

During the International Year, disability as a theme received generous exposure in the media, and for the first time, some of the relevant programmes were no longer invariably relegated to minority viewing hours, but became mainstreamed into the more popular viewing times. This was definitely considered a sign of improvement. In fact, some politicians believed that already by mid-year a saturation point had been reached in the media.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the strong media presence was certainly serviceable for pushing the issue of disability from the realm of social policy to that of high politics. Although the exposure was generous, it was also somewhat disproportional: official events and the conventional associations received the lion's share of the coverage, while emerging grassroots organizations remained ignored. The same applied to the portrayal of various types of disabilities: whereas the disabled population included a high proportion of women and older people and a wide range of physical, mental and developmental disabilities, official and public representations remained dominated by the young and middle-aged physically disabled men and by wheelchair and white-stick users in particular. "Hidden disabilities," i.e. those which are not immediately visible, such as deafness and mental illness, barely featured in the media.

As part of the official mid-year assessment, a confidential report was issued by Stephen Crampton, Secretary of the Committee to the Assistant Private Secretary of the Royal Prince of Wales. It addressed the "small but vocal" hostile element that opposed the IYDP before its outset primarily on three grounds: First, it was not sufficiently confrontational towards the government and as such it was "irrelevant." Second, based on the disparaging experiences drawn from the International Year of the Child (1979), many people questioned if the IYDP would have any impact at all. Third, some believed that even if the IYDP would yield some immediate results, in the longer run it would have no lasting value. As the author of the report noted, opponents in the second and third groups appeared to have been won over, but not those in the first: "Although critics of the first group remain, they are very few in number and are generally political extremists."<sup>23</sup>

### **The grassroots response**

But who were these "political extremists" mentioned in the mid-year assessment? They entailed a number of groups and individuals who were unsatisfied with the official response and did not shy away from voicing their dissent. They believed that the IYDP certainly abounded in lip service and window dressing, but this

merely concealed the intention to leave the status quo intact. These groups' voices became amplified and their activities gained extra impetus thanks to a number of developments on the international scene, in particular, the foundation of the world's first global cross-disability organization, Disabled People's International (DPI). DPI owes its existence to a scandal at the 1980 Winnipeg World Congress of Rehabilitation International, a conventional organization of medical and rehabilitation experts founded in 1922. The tension that emerged during this conference provides a good illustration of the changing perceptions. It was during that meeting that Swedish delegates recommended amending the organization's constitution in such a way that at least 50% of the delegates should be persons with disabilities. This amendment was rejected, much to the irritation of many participants who withdrew from the meeting. They organized an alternative one, at which they decided to form a separate world coalition of persons with disabilities.<sup>24</sup>

The formation of DPI did not in itself provide the pretext for the foundation of a new British organization in the same year, but it definitely lent credibility and legitimacy to a fledgling initiative: the establishment of the British Council of Organisations of Disabled People (BCODP), a national pan-disablement organization.<sup>25</sup> Its initiators remained thoroughly unimpressed with the IYDP:

I suppose what really focused it for me was IYDP in 1981. I was very opposed to this and I went on the radio, the television, wrote articles in the *Guardian* – all over the place – saying what a rotten idea it was. We only seem to have international years for dogs, trees, children or disabled people – never for bank managers or university professors! The whole idea was bound to reinforce notions of dependency and stigmatise us further, rather than to help us – as its proponents were suggesting.<sup>26</sup>

Nevertheless, this frustration turned out to be a creative one because the masterminds of what soon became BCODP realized that what single-impairment groups could achieve was limited and that only a collective voice in the disability community would have the chance to convey an authoritative position. If the complete transformation of disabled people's lives was to be the aim, then the formation of a national organization was imperative. BCODP differed from existing organizations in that it did not cherish close links with politicians and did not accept the control of non-disabled experts. It is also true, however, that unlike the previous governments, Thatcher's government was no longer committed to corporatist negotiations and the influence that experts could exert on it was informal rather than direct.<sup>27</sup> Instead, BCODP sought to collaborate with the local authorities. Moreover, as we have seen, it did not shy away from confrontation.

One such clash occurred with the Snowdon Committee, which in the eyes of BCODP's leaders was coterminous with the traditional disability establishment. They thought of Lord Snowdon as someone who demonstrated interest in the lives of disabled people, but remained blissfully unaware of the agenda of the newly emerging disability movement. For BCODP to become eligible for funding, the

precondition was to collaborate with the Snowdon Committee, or even to subordinate itself to it. As one of its leaders, Phillip Mason, later recalled: “Lord Snowdon was hysterical, they were trying to explain him that they were not opposed to his committee, only wanted disabled people to take control of it, but they were just adamant.”<sup>28</sup> Mason contrasted the poverty of BCODP to the circumstances that he had experienced at a meeting of one of the most important traditional charities, the Leonard Cheshire Foundation: “It was full of these noble do-gooders, men, mainly elderly and mainly military. [...] The sherry was flowing, the room was full of smoke. The affluence that was exhibited was really, really disgusting.”<sup>29</sup>

Another act of protest was expressed by Ian Dury (1942–2000), a British singer and leader of the punk-rock group Blockheads, who was paralysed as a result of contracting polio during the 1949 epidemics. As a prominent artist with a disability, Dury received countless letters from disabled people from all over the country and especially from those who lived in institutions and who shared their feelings of isolation and solitude with him. Dury’s own contribution to the International Year was the song “Spasticus Ausisticus.” He called it his own hymn, which was in fact made *against* the International Year, which, in his view, gave a false signal to people that in the year 1982 everything will be OK. As he put it: “I thought that it was disgusting, the Year of the Disabled.” So, he added: “I wrote the record simply off the top of my head to tell ’em to stick it up their aris.”<sup>30</sup> Sending out a message to people “out there in the normal land,” the title and lyrics of Dury’s song reclaimed the word *spastic* from being an all-purpose derogatory term into one that expressed a distinct identity. It also mocked traditional charitable attitudes that portrayed disabled people as helpless, pitiable victims. Dury offered his song to the United Nations as his contribution to the International Year, but his gesture was unsurprisingly rejected. BBC also refused to play it with the excuse that it had a potentially insulting effect. Dury believed that if the subject matter of the song would have been different, it would have become an instant hit. As he explained: “Just as nobody bans handicapped people – just makes it difficult for them to function as normal people, the song was not banned, just was made impossible to function.”<sup>31</sup>

It was not only the newly formed institutions that made their voices heard during the International Year, but also the already existing ones. UPIAS members noted the little publicity they received: “no accolades, no distribution of knight-hood,” but merely scraps from the table, a programme here, an interview there. They regretted that the “disability establishment” was co-opted to resist attempts at changing the status quo and that it could retain its grip on the media.<sup>32</sup> All in all, the leaders of UPIAS drew the ironic conclusion that the International Year, which its members renamed the Year of the Cabbage, reinforced the very attitudes and practices it was expected to change. UPIAS’s fundamental departure from the traditional, charitable frameworks was also traceable in the different conceptual language that it employed. It addressed social segregation and oppression and focused on the *rights* of disabled people – or more precisely, the lack thereof:

Predictably 1981 – the IYDP – deepened that already entrenched conditions which perpetuate the social oppression of physically impaired people.

The year was ushered in by non-disabled people on our behalf and passed into history to fanfares orchestrated by the same elites [...] The status quo remained intact [...] We read of our nobility crawling out of the royal woodwork to preside over soggy garden parties designed to reinforce our position at the bottom of the social pile. Craftwork competitions were in greater than ever abundance. Arch-segregationists like Mr. Cheshire got their medals topped up for keeping cripples off the streets.<sup>33</sup>

The reference to arch-segregationist Mr. Cheshire was by no means coincidental: UPIAS was originally formed as a consumer group from the discontented residents of the so-called Leonard Cheshire homes; they were charitable nursing establishments of which the first was established in 1948 to find a place for war veteran, Leonard Cheshire. These institutions over time became eponymous with incarceration, where the main reason one ceased to be a service user was death. In 1972, Paul Haunt, a resident of the first Cheshire Home, Le Court, organized strikes and protest actions and sent a letter to *The Guardian* calling out to disabled people who found themselves subject to authoritarian and cruel regimes, something akin to the workhouse. As one analyst noted: “thousands of disabled people are simply surviving out of sight and out of mind in often inaccessible listed buildings situated at the end of a dirt track and/or a dual carriageway whilst Local Authorities politely turn away from the truth that they are financing our incarceration.”<sup>34</sup>

Initially, authorities were “in denial”: they believed that a group of extremists was making noise and expected these radical voices would soon disappear. However, their resistance merely encouraged the protesters who reached the conclusion that the system cannot be changed from within, so they should themselves take initiatives if they wanted to get rid of the unnecessary and costly bureaucratic regulations. One milestone was reached in 1976, when a disabled couple, Maggie and Ken Davies, supported by UPIAS, succeeded in obtaining an accessible home to enable them to live there independently. This was nothing short of a sensation: both medical experts and social workers had insisted that their wish was entirely unrealistic and they would have no chance to succeed. The opposite turned out to be the case. Hence, UPIAS intensified its activities by initiating Project 81 with the aim to break the grip of the Leonard Cheshire Foundation. They planned to set up centres of integrated living which would be controlled and run by disabled people, with the long-term goal of the replacement of all segregated facilities with such arrangements.<sup>35</sup>

### **The right to work and independent living, and their neoliberal incarnations**

As has been hinted earlier, at the official level, the overall impact of the International Year was evaluated in a cautious and somewhat self-exonerating way. For example, the chairman of the IYDP, Sir Christopher Aston, declared that the year could not be a magic wand and no one was foolish enough to claim that all

problems could be solved.<sup>36</sup> Unsurprisingly, the disabled people's organizations were much more disapproving. The Disability Alliance produced a report which regretted the aforementioned reinterpretation of the International Year's aims of "full participation and equality" as "the promotion of greater integration and more participation of disabled people," for which the official excuse was that "the Year comes at a time when there are no resources available for significant improvement in benefits or services."<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, the report pointed to the discrepancies between the British realities and the international desiderata as outlined in international legal frameworks such as the United Nations' Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons (1975) and the European Parliament's resolution on the IYDP. The objectives in the international arena revolved around *rights*: the right to economic and social security and a decent level of employment; and the right to work and to live with family members and to participate in all social, creative and recreational activities. As we have seen, in the national context these desiderata were diluted in such a way that only the issues of attitudes and physical access were addressed: "as if when people with disabilities get inside buildings, they will automatically be integrated."<sup>38</sup>

The irony that the IYDP increased poverty and dependence for many people was not left unaddressed either. Personal social services were reduced, and the social security provision was no longer linked to inflation and was no longer in line with rise of prices or earnings.

This report also pointed out that low levels of income for disabled people were combined with extra expenses – such as additional consumption of food and heating, car for transport and artificial aids. But even sympathetic politicians were highly critical. For example, John Gorst, a Conservative member of the all-party Select Committee of Employment, noted the government got its priorities painfully wrong: "Cuts there have to be, but to choose to injure those who are already disabled seem to me to be a lack of feeling and lack of priorities – and to have done so during the year which was set aside for concentrating on the problems of the disabled shows astonishing insensitivity."<sup>39</sup>

The cuts were part of the wider ideology of the Thatcher government, which no longer accepted the core arguments about structural inequalities causing poverty. It was committed to reducing public expenditure, minimizing the role of the state and privatizing a whole range of services under the pretext of "independence." However, policy experts warned, "The pursuit of independence carries the considerable risk that, for little gain, the real strengths of the Welfare State will be lost."<sup>40</sup> The report issued by UPIAS concluded that the cuts of certain benefits and the removal of others led to a deterioration whereby the existing inadequate services became even more inadequate. It also regretted that "the prospect of the long-awaited non-statutory disability income looked further than ever."<sup>41</sup>

The Disability Alliance found it crucial that, in a society with a strong work ethic, the improvement opportunities be increased. But it concluded that the IYDP failed even on that account: "the hope that it would focus public attention on the widespread deprivation amongst people with disabilities and their need for income, employment and social services has not been fulfilled."<sup>42</sup> The rate of

unemployment was at least double that of the non-disabled and even those who held employment worked for low pay and in poor conditions. A further critique of the Disability Alliance was that despite international recommendations, such as the ones by the European Parliament, in Britain the state failed to recognize that poverty constituted a defining experience for the majority of disabled people and likewise failed to introduce a disablement allowance and a quota system to help disabled people gain employment. At a more fundamental level, the Disability Alliance did not accept the state's artificial and false distinction between the social and economic fields and its prioritization of economic goals over the social ones by subordinating the needs of and rights of people with disabilities to economic demands. It believed that, quite the contrary, the economic policies should conform to the needs and rights of people with disabilities.<sup>43</sup>

The new measures criticized by the grassroots organizations had undoubtedly detrimental effects, but at least initially, they were not purposefully aimed at removing the existing frameworks of basic support. The Thatcher government did not deliberately target the "disability community": such a move could have proven counterproductive because the reputation loss would have been more detrimental than the financial gain.<sup>44</sup> Rather, the negative effects evolved, at least initially, as collateral damage arising from the general dynamics of the welfare retrenchment. However, in the late 1980s this started to change when the government decided to target "welfare dependency" and the (real or alleged) abuses of the welfare system. The policies of the welfare state, which had hitherto been expected to provide the solution to major economic and social problems, now became identified as the primary cause of those very problems.<sup>45</sup>

In determining the extent of its welfare provision, every state is confronted with a predicament, which Deborah Stone in her book *The Disabled State* (1994) phrased as the distributive dilemma: how to cater for the needs of those who have no access to the labour market without damaging the societal work ethic.<sup>46</sup> The government addressed this dilemma by reclassifying disability categories with the predetermined aim to restrict access to benefits and propel as many people as possible to employment. It redefined the concept of disability in terms of one's ability to perform paid work or not: those who were not able to work were labelled "sick," whereas the other group was expected to enter the workforce.<sup>47</sup> This new division recalled the old binary of the Poor Law between the "deserving" and the "undeserving" poor, and it removed some of the citizenship entitlements from the latter group.<sup>48</sup>

Although the government relied, to some extent, on the hegemonic power of medical experts, it retained the monopoly to reclassify the categories of working capacity. In doing so, it increased its reliance on means-testing with the excuse that this was necessary for concentrating assistance where it was most needed. But means-tested benefits are usually replete with ambiguous definitions that result in irrational and arbitrary decisions. Those who had lost their disability status as an outcome of this reassessment were expected to enter an employment market where even many able-bodied citizens had difficulties finding a job. If they fell out of the workforce, they experienced higher rates and longer periods

of unemployment. Even when they were employed, they were subject to both “vertical” and “horizontal” segregation: they are overrepresented in less skilled and part-time, temporary work, and they also tend to be confined to specific types of work.<sup>49</sup> Without any legally binding expectations to accommodate special needs and enable workforce integration, employers relied on the “reserve army of labour” provided by disabled people only in times of labour shortages and/or as a way to control wages in times of growing demand for workers.<sup>50</sup> Those few who still managed to find a job had typically only very moderate forms of disability, and even they were employed in casualized, flexible forms. The impact of these new bureaucratic mechanisms was that many disabled people who had previously qualified for state disability entitlements were now propelled into disability workfare programmes. These programmes have been labelled as “disciplining regimes” because participation in them was a condition to maintain entitlements in their reduced form. The outcome of restratification was the emergence of a new group: people who were “living in-between,” not being disabled seriously enough to deserve welfare provision, but not being able-bodied enough to get a chance at the job market.<sup>51</sup>

As these processes reveal, the disability movement’s demand of the right to work was de-collectivized by the neoliberal state. It was reduced to merely being a means of self-sufficiency for the autonomous and competitive citizen. The dimension of social inclusion and contribution to a greater degree of equality was entirely ignored. Moreover, the disability movement envisioned participation with the necessary supporting mechanisms, another aspect that was thoroughly disregarded by the state. The consequence was that, paradoxically, the withdrawal of existing services and the lack of implementation of new support mechanisms often led to increased levels of poverty and marginalization rather than “independence.”<sup>52</sup>

The concept of independent living and community care was first embraced by representatives of the disability movement and then by the neoliberal government. Ironically, while in the majority of cases, resistance to changing the status quo was justified by financial reasons on the part of the authorities, it was evident that the highly expensive institutional care entirely defied economic rationality. Hospitalization and/or residential care cost far more than allowing people to remain in their homes with adequate support, so, in fact, maintaining entirely unacceptable environments that deprived people of stimulation and affection cost the taxpayer dearly.<sup>53</sup> It is true that the notion of independent living and care in the community meant many things to many people:

To the politician, ‘community care’ is a useful piece of rhetoric; to the sociologist, it is a stick to beat institutional care with; to the civil servant, it is a cheap alternative to institutional care which can be passed to the local authorities for action – or inaction; to the visionary, it is a dream of a new society in which people do really care; to social service departments, it is a nightmare of heightened public expectations and inadequate resources to meet them.<sup>54</sup>

In addition to these various approaches, the concept of independent living as envisaged by British representatives of the disability movement deviated from its original principles that were formulated in the United States in the 1970s. The rationale of independent-living centres in the United States drew strongly on the notions of consumerism, self-help, self-reliance and individual rights. To put it differently, it could be brought into alignment with neoliberal ideology and a market-oriented approach. By contrast, in Britain its initiators perceived independent living as an alternative model of self-organized welfare, which was expected to contribute to political autonomy and democratic participation and therefore did not fully embrace a market-based approach.<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, it was a significant achievement of disability activists that the relevance of the concept gradually became indisputable even if its practical realization did not entirely follow the desired premises. Authorities were willing to support personal care and assistance with domestic chores but support for activities that would have facilitated social integration, such as hobbies or the cherishing of relationships were largely ignored. Another difference between the vision of the disability movement and the neoliberal state was the provision of care: representatives of the disability movement envisaged it in a formal contractual context, whereas the neoliberal preference was for informal care. A further step in the realization of a greater degree of independence was the idea of a personal budget and direct cash payment in lieu of social assistance which allowed disabled people to customize their needs for care. In this matter, disability activists succeeded in persuading the Conservative government that it was compatible with its agenda to promote market competition and personal choice. The year 1990 saw the passing of the NHS Community Care Act and 1996 the Direct Payment Act, and these gave greater role to the private and voluntary sectors in a quasi-market setting.

## **Epilogue**

When the Thatcher government started to attack and, in many cases, reduce or abolish existing services, members of the disability movement were forced into a difficult position: instead of advocating the introduction of new services, they found themselves compelled to defend the legitimacy of the existing ones. This situation continued to persist even during tenure of New Labour governments, which further pursued the project of realigning the state, economy and society along the lines of the neoliberal agenda.<sup>56</sup> At the core of that agenda was market-based citizenship with the expectation that citizens should act in a “responsible” way while self-managing their lives. The concept of welfare-to-work, which implied work for those who can and security for those who cannot, likewise remained a central pillar.<sup>57</sup>

Whereas the International Year brought disappointment for many people, judged by its legacy in the longer term, the balance does not turn out to be entirely negative. For example, the International Year saw an attempt to introduce an anti-discrimination law, the Alf Morris Bill. While the attempt itself failed, the

proposal provided the foundation for the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) in 1995.<sup>58</sup> What was novel about this act is that it represented a new policy dimension by including a statutory right to challenge discrimination in the workplace. It is true that the original scope of this legislation was watered down in its final version: unlike in the case of comparable legislation on sex and race, discrimination was deemed illegal only if proven “unjustifiable” and the inclusion of the term “reasonable accommodation” removed the legislation’s teeth by rendering guaranteed enforcement impossible. As disability activist Mike Oliver noted, the Tory leader William Hague regarded the DDA as one of his greatest successes, when in reality he had “turned the legislation into a pale shadow of what it should have been.”<sup>59</sup> Another phenomenon which continued to characterize the post-1981 era was the tension between the agendas of traditional charities and the new disability organizations. To that end, Oliver regretted that the Spastic Society fiercely opposed the Disability Discrimination Act and only changed its attitude when its introduction became imminent.

In legislative terms, a landmark was reached in 2009 when Britain signed the United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Yet, the trend that everyday practice continues to lag behind legislative norms has persisted: the pioneering human-rights-based approach failed to fulfil the expectations, all the more so because it promotes the importance of disability advocacy work and lobbying at the expense of service provision. Ironically, if they wished to be eligible for funding, even disabled people’s organizations have been forced to accept these dynamics. Nonetheless, without satisfactory welfare services disabled people may feel that the expectation of independence is coterminous with their abandonment on the part of the state. The old warning that “invocations of self-help must bring a particular despair to those who would give anything to be able to help themselves”<sup>60</sup> remains valid, and the application of the human-rights-based model cannot succeed without first addressing the deficiencies of the welfare state that lie deep in its architecture. Ultimately, constant and often unqualified references to the notion of responsibility may provoke the question: what is the responsibility of *the state* towards its vulnerable citizens?

## Notes

- 1 The author acknowledges the support of the ERC Consolidator Grant Rethinking Disability contract no. 648115 for writing this article.
- 2 Karen Soldatic and Helen Meekosha, “Disability and Neoliberal State Formations,” in *Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies*, ed. Nick Watson, Alan Roulstone, and Carol Thomas (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 207.
- 3 Among the two most recent seminal accounts are the doctoral thesis of Gareth Millward, “Invalid Definitions, Invalid Responses: Disability and the Welfare State, 1965–1995” (PhD thesis, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, 2013); Jameel Hampton, *Disability and the Welfare State in Britain: Changes in Perception and Policy 1948–1979* (Bristol: Policy Press 2016); Anne Borsay, *Disability and Social Policy in Britain since 1750: A History of Exclusion* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004);

- and Sonali Shah and Mark Priestley, *Disability and Social Change: Private Lives and Public Policies* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2011). The overview in this section draws on these works.
- 4 The material is held in the University of Liverpool Special Collections & Archives, under reference number GB 141 D383, and it contains 36 boxes; no online catalogue of these items is available at the moment. The records of the Secretariat, in addition to its own materials, also contain papers regarding the UN resolution and the IYDP working groups, as well as video and sound recordings, IYDP publicity, posters and press cuttings.
  - 5 Disability Income Group's comment published in *The Times*, 1 February 1969, p. 2, as quoted in Millward, "Invalid Definitions, Invalid Responses," 285.
  - 6 DIG Memorandum, as quoted in Millward, "Invalid Definitions, Invalid Responses," 73.
  - 7 Irene Loach and Ruth Lister, "Second Class Disabled: A Report on the Non-Contributory Invalidity Pension for Married Women" (Equal Rights for Disabled Women Campaign: London, July 1978), 1, accessed 2 February 2019, <https://disability-studies.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/40/library/lister-original-version.pdf>.
  - 8 Alan Walker and Peter Townsend, eds., *Disability in Britain: A Manifesto of Rights* (Oxford: Martin Robertson & Company, 1981), preface, ix.
  - 9 Millward, "Invalid Definitions, Invalid Responses," 167.
  - 10 Borsay, *Disability and Social Policy*, 201.
  - 11 See Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, "Neo-Liberalism and Morality in the Making of Thatcherite Social Policy," *The Historical Journal* 55, no. 2 (2012): 497–520.
  - 12 Newsletter of the IYDP Secretariat (1981), 19, Archives of the International Secretariat, D 383/2/1/1.
  - 13 *Ibid.*, 5.
  - 14 The full speech can be accessed online at [www.royal.uk/christmas-broadcast-1981](http://www.royal.uk/christmas-broadcast-1981), accessed on 2 February 2019.
  - 15 By the end of the International Year approximately 20 sizeable dossiers were filled with the correspondence of the Snowdon Committee, the majority of which included letters written by individuals. These dossiers are held under the classification D 383/2/2 in the Liverpool University Archives.
  - 16 Archives of the International Secretariat, D 383/2/2/2.
  - 17 A campaign in IYDP for a general disability income, brochure, 4, D 383/2/7/11.
  - 18 Joint Project, All Party Disablement Group, House of Commons brochure, without page number, D 383/2/4/2.
  - 19 "Motion: IYDP," *House of My Lords Parliamentary Debates. House of Lords Official Report* 416, no. 17 (14 January, 1981), 140, D.383/2/4/1.
  - 20 Derek Kinrade, *Alf Morris: People's Parliamentarian – Scenes from the Life of Lord Morris of Manchester* (London: National Information Forum, 2007), 279.
  - 21 Campaign for Disability Income, Minute Book of the IYDP Committee, 3, D383/2/1/11980/81.
  - 22 "Motion: IYDP," *House of Lords Parliamentary Debates. House of Lords Official Report* 9, D.383/2/4/1.
  - 23 Report produced on 16 July 1981, D 383/2/1/6.
  - 24 Diane Driedger, *The Last Civil Rights Movement: Disabled People's International* (London: Hurst & Company, and New York: St Martin's Press, 1989), 36.
  - 25 Jane Campbell and Mike Oliver, *Disability Politics: Understanding Our Past, Changing Our Future* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 84.
  - 26 *Ibid.*, 188–189.
  - 27 Millward, "Invalid Definitions, Invalid Responses," 186.
  - 28 Campbell and Oliver, *Disability Politics*, 82.
  - 29 *Ibid.*, 82.

- 30 Richard Balles, *Sex & Drugs & Rock 'n' Roll: The Life of Ian Dury* (London, New York, Sydney: Omnibus Press, 2011), 239. See also G.A. McKay, "'Crippled with Nerves': Popular Music and Polio, with Particular Reference to Ian Dury," *Popular Music*, 28, no. 3 (2009): 341–365.
- 31 Balles, *Sex & Drugs & Rock 'n' Roll*, 240.
- 32 UPIAS – Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation, *Disability Challenge* 2, December 1983, 5, accessed 2 February 2019, <https://disability-studies.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/40/library/UPIAS-Disability-Challenge-2.pdf>.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 1.
- 34 "Laurence Clark, "Leonard Cheshire vs. The Disabled Persons' Movement: A Review," Disability Studies virtual archives, accessed 2 February 2019, <https://disability-studies.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/40/library/Clark-Laurence-leonard-cheshire.pdf>.
- 35 UPIAS, *Disability Challenge*, 6–7.
- 36 "International Year of Disabled People: A Beginning Not an End" brochure, 46, D 383/2/1/1.
- 37 Alan Walker and Peter Townsend, *Disability in Britain: A Manifesto of Rights* (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1981), 9.
- 38 *Ibid.*, 15.
- 39 *The Guardian*, 30 January 1981, as cited in Walker and Townsend, *Disability in Britain*, 13.
- 40 Barbara Waive, *The Rhetoric of Independence? The Ideology and Practice of Social Policy in Thatcher's Britain* (New York and Oxford: Berg, 1991), 158.
- 41 UPIAS, *Disability Challenge*, 47.
- 42 Walker and Townsend, *Disability in Britain*, 5.
- 43 *Ibid.*, 5.
- 44 Millward, "Invalid Definitions, Invalid Responses," 191.
- 45 Colin Barnes and Geof Mercer, *Exploring Disability* (Polity Press: Cambridge, 2010), 101.
- 46 Deborah A. Stone, *The Disabled State* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984).
- 47 Millward, "Invalid Definitions, Invalid Responses," 235–236.
- 48 Chris Grover and Karen Soldatic, "Neoliberal Restructuring, Disabled People and Social (In)Security in Australia and Britain," *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research* 15, no. 3 (2013): 217.
- 49 Barnes and Mercer, *Exploring Disability*, 114.
- 50 C. Grover and L. Piggott, "Disabled People, the Reserve Army of Labour and Welfare Reform," *Disability and Society* 20, no. 7 (2005): 705–717.
- 51 Karen Soldatic and Helen Meekosha, "Disability and Neoliberal State Formations," in *Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies*, ed. Nick Watson, Alan Roulstone, and Carol Thomas (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 202.
- 52 *Ibid.*, 202.
- 53 *Ibid.*, 214.
- 54 Jones K. Brown and J. Bradshaw, *Issues in Social Policy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 114.
- 55 Charlotte Pearson, "Independent Living," in *Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies*, ed. Nick Watson, Alan Roulstone, and Carol Thomas (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 241.
- 56 For more on this, see Randall Owen and Sarah Parker Harris, "No Rights without Responsibilities: Disability Rights and Neoliberal Reform under New Labour," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 32, no. 3 (2012), accessed 2 February 2019, <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/3283>.

- 57 For a more comprehensive account of this shift, see Bernhard Rieger, "Making Britain Work Again: Unemployment and the Remaking of British Social Policy in the Eighties," *The Historical Journal* 562, no. 133 (June 2018): 634–666.
- 58 Mike Oliver, "Rewriting History: The Case of the DDA 1995," *Disability & Society* 31, no. 7 (2016): 966–968.
- 59 John Pring, "Mike Oliver Delivers a Stringing Rebuke to 'Parasitic' Disability Charities," 30 November 2017, accessed 2 February 2019, <https://ukdhm.org/one-of-the-key-figures-in-the-disabled-peoples-movement-has-come-out-of-retirement-to-deliver-a-stinging-rebuke-to-parasitic-disability-charities/>.
- 60 Key Andrews and John Jacobs, *Punishing the Poor: Poverty under Thatcher* (London: Macmillan, 1990), 95.