

## DRILL through history beyond the present for the future

Taking a look at the world today it seems that the equality agenda, has taken a backward step. Brexit and the quest for the leadership of American democracy has been characterised by many as a global manifestation of a backlash against progressive forces that sought to promote equality for all. We are left simply to reflect on the apathy or cacophony of angry voices as a guide in choosing moral leadership to uphold the nobility of human rights and the future of democracy. Gone in an instance is the history of struggle, endurance that must inform and shape progressive forces in our future. It is in this history that lies our desire to look beyond the dark clouds of our history, from the politics of superficial opposition to the politics of inclusion.

Such progressive forces, perhaps through the lens of rose tinted glasses of a dreamer were often rooted in the social conscience of the civil rights movements, so prevalent, it appears, in the Europe and United States of the 1960s. For my generation, especially for me, it was the Russian Revolution of the 1980's and 1990's not the one of 1917, that is my earliest memory. Whatever it's failings, it cannot be forgotten, for its achievements or the lessons for a future progressive agenda. Such struggles create our own personal heroes. **Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev** in the idealism of youth was mine. His policies of glasnost ("openness") and perestroika ("restructuring") of the old Soviet Union, contributed to the end of the Cold War, and in that moment respite from the ugly possibility of nuclear Armageddon. But for the old enemy of political opportunism, driven by the personal ambition of his successors in the Russian leadership, his undeniable courage would have created I'm convinced, a fertile ground for the future growth of a more progressive agenda. Nonetheless, his fate forces us to conclude that the heroism and self-sacrifice of the individual even at the highest level, matter little, in the promotion of a progressive agenda, unless enshrined in the principle of solidarity and born of a grass-roots desire for change, typical of the black civil rights movement in the United States, or the ending of Apartheid in 1990's South Africa.

On his way to the White House, Donald Trump encouraged the American people (a significant minority), with the help of the

deficiencies of the electoral college, to tolerate a diet racism, sexism and disabilism which thus far has delivered a nightmare on the global stage. Certainly not the American dream, traditionally punctuated, by the heroism of the struggle for equality and human rights, present for us today in form of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and clearly in evidence in the land mark cases before the US Supreme Court. The triumph in the battle for racial equality to the most recent close decision to adopt equal marriage into federal law, supports the notion at least that America has always been a progressive force. Failures in foreign policy, underpinning Muslim extremism, failure to ratify the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in an increasingly bitter and divided Congress and the decision by Trump to withdraw from the global Paris Climate Change Agreement suggests it is no longer the beacon of moral leadership in the world that successive Presidents from Roosevelt to Obama have always proclaimed it to be. Furthermore Trump's pledge to reshape the Supreme Court in his own image with the appointment of three Associate Justices to the court during his term of office indicates that the blossoming of a human rights and equality agenda will not happen for some time. Indeed, there is a distinct possibility that his brand of discriminatory politics will go beyond his presidency.

Closer to home, the political and social landscape, in terms of the ongoing struggle for equality and human rights is likely in the short term to suffer a similar fate to its American cousin. Brexit fuelled, in my opinion, by racism, fear and division offers little opportunity for an equality and human rights agenda to flourish. Threats to abolish the Human Rights Act alongside the damning report of the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities that concluded that disabled people's human rights have been the subject of systematic and grave violations. We have seen the government's austerity policies of benefit cuts, cuts in public services placed disproportionately and recklessly on our shoulders. Not to mention the fact that our departure from the European Union is more than likely going to limit the progression of domestic equality laws that formed the historical basis for challenging discrimination and inequality.

The dismal picture above becomes even darker when we look at Northern Ireland, a post-conflict society more in common with the dark ages than the positive enlightenment that at least in part has

influenced the 21st century. Not only is the fortune of the human rights and equality agenda struggling against the global forces of negative populism on both sides of the Atlantic, it also has the misfortune to be competing against the demigods of Unionism and Nationalism. Neither offer a progressive non-opposing human rights equality agenda. Indeed, whatever the political and public discourse here, equality and human rights is often far from the main concern of the political elites. It rarely goes beyond flattering and deceiving public utterances of ill-informed politicians who have yet to understand that a progressive agenda of equality and human rights is to the betterment of society as a whole. This is not, as some might claim to the advantage of one or the other warring factions too concerned with history rather than living the present.

Realism does not negate the possibility of progressive change, nor the desire in each of us to make a difference. The doom and gloom scenario painted above may well indeed be the portrait that dominates the political and social realm of the present, and that's okay because it is not our future. The struggle for equality and human rights must have an understanding of this reality to which it is opposed, which in itself is not a harbinger of doom, but the foundation for desperately needed change. Indeed, the reality is there never has been and never will be a garden of Eden, a heaven where the blue sky of equality and human rights has not been tempered by dark, grey clouds. Perhaps today the clouds are darker than usual as many seek to fill the swamp of deplorable acts that have so marked our political and social landscape of recent times.

Of course for disabled people the challenge some might say is even greater than that faced by most other human rights movements because historically our voices have been silent for the most part on the political and world stage. Until the birth of the Convention on the Rights of Person's with Disabilities, we did not even constitute consideration as human beings never mind as citizens of nation states. Rather, we were a constituency of special needs, objects of charity and pity whose issues had no place on a human rights agenda. Why would it? We didn't have any to begin with. Even our legislation in its current form refers to special educational needs and does not take as its central theme the right to an education, fully articulated in Article 24 of the Convention but diluted by the desire for special education rather

than the long-term goal of proper mainstream educational provision. Even I know that the word "special needs" forged in the mentality of years passed will remain in the political and social fabric of our society as many still grapple with the idea that we are first and foremost human beings entitled to fundamental human rights. As with everything, we are at the mercy of public opinion, and the court of public opinion has not always weighed the merits of the evidence that we are indeed human beings entitled to a voice on an equal basis with all others in society.

The fact that the two major political upheavals of recent times, Brexit and the US elections, relied less on informed public debate and more on personalities, vitriolic and rhetoric and that the issues facing disabled people received little attention beyond the discriminatory actions towards a reporter with cerebral palsy is of surprise to no-one. God forbid that the will of the people be informed by reasoned and passionate debate rather than the lies and half-truths that seemed to undercut the people's mandate. Not that we didn't speak out, it was our voice, or more accurately the voice of our brothers and sisters, who convinced the Committee at the UN that our rights were being violated so much so that in the ensuing investigation, our claims were completely upheld. The outcome of that investigation however, its findings and conclusions, did not it would appear, in any way influence the outcome of these exercises in participative democracy. However, if nothing else, it proved that the government's actions can be scrutinised by an independent body whose opinion cannot easily be dismissed under the guise of political opposition or bias and remains a potent weapon for us to challenge the government to do better. We were not greeted with the usual dismissive utterances of 'sorry its simply unmet need' but in the more assertive language of human rights, even if only to proclaim, a bold truth that we may be in principle, holders of rights - many are still under the sledge hammer of abuse and outright violations. One cannot challenge a lie, if we don't know the truth.

Nonetheless, despite the governments current approach to the implementation of the Convention, we should be loathed to forget a simple and most important fact - the Convention exists and remains the blueprint for the progression of our equality and human rights. This is a significant landmark no less important than the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement 1998, though with considerably less global attention. It will likely save as many lives

and protect the quality of life of many of its now citizens as the historic agreement that ended, we hope, a 400 year old conflict that led to the tragic loss of over 3000 lives in modern times and indeed unjustly expanded our constituency.

So why do we have hope, faith in the future when the present is so bleak and without the immediate reprieve from hardship and misery? The answer to these questions is threefold. Firstly, the Convention itself becomes a model for where we need to go. Secondly, it changes the nature of political and public discourse around our issues to one of rights rather than needs. Thirdly, and most importantly, the Convention reminds us that we are part of a global human rights movement and that we are not alone. It reminds us too of the importance of solidarity of all disabled people and their allies towards a common goal that goes beyond the failures of one nation, state or another. We are also reminded too that in ratifying the Convention that the UK government, along with other signatories recognise the desire to at least treat disabled people better in the future than perhaps they have in the present or the past. Furthermore, no government can violate our rights with impunity without incurring the wrath and rebuke of the international community.

We highlighted above that the Convention can now act as a model for where we need to go as a human rights movement, and most strikingly the role of disabled people, their allies in the future development of that movement.

Speaking as a proud member of the Northwest Forum of People with Disabilities, Disabled People's Voices Northern Ireland and volunteer among many with Disability Action, I want to tell you about an exciting research project known as **DRILL** and let you know it's potential to make a huge difference in the lives of disabled people living in the United Kingdom.

I would urge anyone reading this blog to 'drill' beyond the conflicting economic and social realities governing our lives at this time (cuts to services and welfare); the election of a reality TV host as the 45th President of the United States; our concerns and preoccupation with BREXIT, the UK's popular vote to leave the European Union; and celebrate the emergence of DRILL which will likely produce informed debate and hopefully deliver positive

change in one form or another for disabled people living here, in the very near future.

**DRILL (Disability Research on Independent Living and Learning)** is a five-year initiative to deliver the world's first major **5 million pound** research programme **led by disabled people**, exploring the realities disabled people experience which has begun assessing research applications from every corner of the UK. Yes research, informed, designed and delivered by us to influence how government and others address our right to live independently.

We are working in a genuine partnership with researchers and policy makers many of whom are people like me who have a lifetime understanding of living with a disability; to develop and oversee research and pilot projects. Yes, you've understood correctly, we are the key players in identifying, informing and leading research in understanding in a very real and concrete way the historical and present realities which impact on our collective desire and our human right to live independent lives. This groundbreaking research programme is completely driven by the overall objective to investigate how public money can be best used to enable us to take part socially, economically and politically as citizens, and what solutions will work best in an ever changing world.

I believe that this innovative research project driven by disabled people will ultimately be of greater significance for those of us living in the UK and here in Northern Ireland than the two unprecedented outcomes which showed two nations voters divided over the future direction of their respective countries. Our collective experiences and even the abuse of one reporter, denigrated because of his disability, had little or no obvious influence on the national political stage. Yet DRILL by its very existence, through the successes of the many projects it has funded so far, should do a number of important things. Firstly, inform future political and public debate beyond personalities and rhetoric. Secondly, it is a perfect example of collaboration and partnership between disabled people and non disabled people, their allies when we collectively put the interests of the movement first and the voice of disabled people first rather than the intersectionality of conflict between service based organisations and disabled persons led organisations. Such distinctions

become less important if collaborative relationships work, and this one has. Finally, Drill's themes are firmly based on the Convention and a human rights approach, which makes the struggle for change much easier to achieve because we are all using the same foundation to progress and one that will most definitely become the model for other projects to follow in the future.

Crucially, DRILL has its foundation in a grass roots movement led by those whose lives it seeks to change. Further, it values the role of our allies and that while we may lead this project, the good will, hard work of our allies, disabled and non-disabled are a crucial ingredient to its success. This was perhaps the biggest failing of the modern Russian revolution it had no grass roots, nor the history of struggle and endurance to support it. So to the language used to describe DRILL and inform and shape the dialogue of all those involved is the language of positivity and affirmation of human rights, a failing of the US elections and the desperate discourse surrounding Brexit. Perhaps we are providing the leadership so sadly lacking in the current political leadership of failed diplomacy, putrid dialogue across both sides of the Atlantic.

When DRILL was first conceived by the four disability organisations involved and funded by the National Lottery, they didn't imagine it would measure up to advancing the human rights of disabled people as other movements had progressed in the 1960's. It will be a quiet revolution and one where information and knowledge alone will be mightier than any single street protest that preceded it. As for my heroes, in this wider modern and new revolution, it has to be the people who conceived this ambitious undertaking, despite the global doom and gloom, they have chosen to continue this struggle fighting with all their might for what is right; no matter the odds or the weight of history. My views, your views, our views, do matter. If DRILL says anything else, it proclaims precisely that.

Two things are certain. You and me when we work in solidarity with each other: we become an us. Together we make a difference. Alone, without the other disabled and non-disabled, we are drowned by popularism - which by definition excludes the minority, no matter how reasonable or compassionate our voice. Secondly, by the very nature of DRILL, and indeed our movement

we will always challenge popularism born of ignorance, fear and despair. The struggle for equality and human rights and the desire for knowledge and enlightenment is exactly that. It is keeping faith in the good, in the struggle for a better tomorrow, bound neither by the past or the present, by a hard or soft Brexit or dare we say any resident in a White House.

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