

Future Directions in Pursuing International Disability Issues

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Introduction

This paper arises out of a study of Canada's role in pursuing international disability issues in the years after World War II, but with particular emphasis on the final quarter of the twentieth century. In this we have been joined by a number of colleagues who bring a wealth of experience in and a breadth of perspectives on international disability developments.¹

We begin by providing a brief context in which the pursuit of disability issues internationally evolved, and a brief summary of main activities and accomplishments, we then proceed to an analysis of themes derived from the data, and conclude with some observations on the frameworks within which the themes may be interpreted followed by conclusions about implications for future priority and directions. The purpose of this paper is to set out for discussion some tentative conclusions about what might be learned from the various experiences as we have been able to document them.

The choice of WWII, as a point at which to begin our analysis, is partly a convenience, but also has sound rationales. Most major internationally agreed upon principles as they affect how we think about disability have emerged since then, influenced by a number of major and universal forces that emerged with increasing intensity during and after the war. Development of information technology generally, and the microchip in particular, has led to an information technology and communications revolution not seen since Guttenberg invented the printing press. It has profoundly changed how we think about time, distance and the meaning of accessibility. Breakthroughs in various fields of science, particularly in biochemical and physiological research, have led to research on the fundamental building blocks of life and contributed to better health and an aging population, but also to new ethical dilemmas for those concerned with disability. Increasing democratization of societies around the world almost invariably has been accompanied by emerging trends in ethnic and cultural self-determination, and by the growing importance of civil society organizations. Not the least amongst these, from our point of view, has been the emergence of strong and continuing disability self-advocacy organizations. Finally, the growth and widespread acceptance of the view that individuals have human and civil rights distinct from those of the state arguably has been the greatest force of all in the past fifty years. Aside from creating a context within which democratization could occur, and a climate where widespread use of information technologies could be used in creative ways, it eventually legitimized the view that disabled people can and should be fully included in all facets of social, economic and community life.

It is in this context that Canada, along with a few other "like minded states", took a leadership role on the international stage in promoting the rights of disabled people. This didn't

¹We gratefully acknowledge contributions, in part or whole, to this paper by (in alphabetical order): April D'Aubin, CCD; Normand Boucher, Patrick Foucherollas and P. Majeau, Laval University; Julie Egers, University of Calgary; Irene Feika, DPI; Yutta Fricke, formerly of DPI, Winnipeg; Diane Richler, CACL; Deborah Stienstra, University of Winnipeg and CCDS; and, Linda White, Toronto. In addition, we gratefully acknowledge other members of our advisory committee (notably Colleen Watters and Joan Westland), and the many people we interviewed and/or who contributed vignettes and other materials for the paper, too many to name.