

Editorial

Political Changes Signal a Time to Revitalize Disability Ideals

Ivan Brown

On Sunday mornings, I have a habit of nestling down in the comfortable old red chair by the fireplace in the study of my house that was built in 1905. My routine seldom varies, because I know precisely what I want to do for the next while. I have the crossword puzzle from the morning paper in one hand, and a freshly brewed coffee in the other. The stereo is set softly to an "oldies" station, for at this particular time of the week I have no desire to suffer the interruption of something new. It is a time to keep alive and cherish one of the habits that I have learned brings pleasurable moments to my life.

Like most people, I have learned to follow a life that balances pleasurable moments like this with the moments of innovation and change that characterize some of the rest of my week. Life is very dull if there is little change, but very stressful if there is too much change. The art of successful living is to keep enjoying the Sunday morning crossword and coffee by the fireplace, and, indeed, all those aspects of your past that continue to bring you enjoyment, while having the wisdom and the courage to let go of those that do not bring you enjoyment so that you can make room for the new.

The art of good politics is the same. To be successful over time, political leaders need to understand and encourage aspects of our society that are continuing to contribute positively to most people's lives, while having the wisdom and courage to drop policies and practices that are not working well and to replace them with better ideas. When voters decide it is time for political changes - as has occurred in Ontario over the past several weeks - it is an indication there is no better time to look at what needs to be kept and what needs to be changed in both the ideals and practical ideas of our own field, developmental disabilities. A change in the political scene signifies that our political leaders have not been able to identify what old habits the public wants to retain, what new changes it wants to embrace, or how to find the correct balance between the two.

It sometimes seems odd to us that most political parties themselves spend less time trying to understand this correct balance than they do positioning themselves for achieving and maintaining political power. Sometimes they simply find it easier to capitalize on the issue of the day, and sometimes they have an agenda that they want to push forward. Whatever the reason, creating a helpful vision for the future that builds on the successes of the past and incorporates new ideas, and creating a set of policies for applying that vision, is much less common than is ideal. Instead, suggestions for vision and policy often have to come from specific fields and professions where there is a wealth of knowledge, but from which governments often have not been in the habit of seeking advice, although they should.

The field of developmental disabilities in Ontario is one that is in need of a strong vision for the future and a set of policies to put that vision into operation. There has been no substantive policy document since 1997, and even then Making Services Work for People set out a vision for containing services and public spending rather than enhancing the lives of individuals with disabilities. A more positive vision for the future, one that blends what is well worth cherishing from the past with what is well worth trying out in the future, would be one where people with developmental disabilities:

- are recognized and valued as contributing members of society
- live adult lifestyles that match their aspirations
- engage in the everyday activities of their communities
- have a variety of social relationships, including friends, family, and acquaintances
- derive fulfillment from their practical daily activities
- have hope and goals for the future

The policy to be developed in support of such a vision needs to be guided by two questions, taken from the discussion above:

1. What principles and specific practices from the past are valuable and need to be maintained and enhanced?
2. What principles and specific practices need to be let go to make room for better ideas?

Policy needs to be developed in a number of areas, but four areas are highlighted below by way of providing some starting-off points. Readers

will immediately bring to mind any number of other ideas that emerge from their own experience.

- *Social responsibility for human rights.* People with developmental disabilities in Canada are protected from unequal treatment in legal documents. Yet, specific policy is required to encourage society as a whole to assume responsibility for the rights of all citizens, including people with developmental disabilities.
- *Supports in schools.* Since 1980, Ontario children with special needs have had the right to an education. But budget cuts in recent years have resulted in support for such children being badly eroded, and the social and academic skills so necessary for future independence are being compromised. New policy needs to ensure that children with developmental delays receive sufficient support to learn the skills they need for successful living in an inclusive educational environment.
- *Employment and other meaningful daily activity.* Community employment for adults with developmental disabilities continues to be an illusive goal, in spite of numerous approaches over the past few decades. New, more flexible, policy here needs to support the principles that most people with developmental disabilities 1) need to be engaged in daily activities that are personally fulfilling to them, 2) have a capacity and need to "give back" to others in a variety of forms, and 3) value being rewarded for work done by receiving their income from their place of employment. New policy also needs to recognize that employers, those who supervise volunteers, and other community people require ongoing support and incentives to include people with developmental disabilities over time.
- *Housing and care options for adults.* Successive governments over the past two decades have recognized that providing housing and the accompanying support for all adults with developmental disabilities is costly. The result has been to encourage families to take greater responsibility for their adult children with developmental disabilities. This option is not ideal for all families, and does not address the difficult and ongoing problem of how to care for adult children when their parents become less capable of providing care. Policy that encourages a wide variety of creative housing and support options has not developed, but needs to be.

Political change acts as a reminder to us that change is possible in our own field as well. It signifies a time to renew our hope for the future and to revitalize our ideals. When doing so, it is as important to embrace new ideas that are likely to enhance the lives of people with disabilities as it is to bring forward the comfortable habits that we have grown accustomed to and that have added so much to life already.

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