

Voluntary Action History Seminar at the Institute of Historical Research

**SEMINAR ABSTRACT**

30 January 2012, 5.30pm

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Disability and Voluntarism in Britain, 1965-1995: an effective force in policy making?

In 1965 the Disablement Income Group was established, marking the beginning of what is traditionally termed the “disability movement” in the United Kingdom. At the time, there was little legal or social security protection for the disabled. By the end of 1995 Britain passed its first anti-discrimination legislation to protect disabled people. During this time, new political conceptions of disability emerged. No longer was disability seen as a purely medical issue, requiring institutionalisation, rehabilitation and charity, but as a social issue caused by the inherent unfairness of a world constructed to exclude those with impairments.

What role did voluntary organisations play in the policy making of this period? By looking at the interactions between government and voluntary organisations, I will examine how effective organisations have been in pursuing their political demands. This ties into my wider PhD study on what the government’s conception of disability was and how this affected the policy decisions that were made.

Many histories stress how new movements of disabled people challenged the hegemony of the large charities which often gave very little voice to the disabled people they supposedly helped. These charities also had undue influence with politicians and government. However, these histories have often been written by disabled activists who were often involved in these political struggles. I will take a slightly different approach and examine how the government behaved and whether and to what extent these new movements were able to change the government’s conception of disability.

I will look at the tactics employed by these organisations and their behaviour both towards government and towards each other. I will also examine the roles of key individuals as well as the general political climate of the late twentieth century to evaluate how effective these groups were. In particular, I will focus on the newer pan-impairment organisations which differed from the traditional, impairment-specific charities, as well as impairment-specific advocacy groups: namely, the Disablement Income Group (DIG); the Disability Alliance (DA); the Royal Association for Disability and Rehabilitation (RADAR); and the British Council of Organisations of Disabled People (BCODP, now the UKDPC).