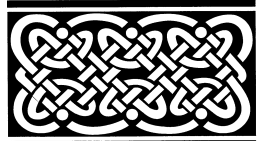


CALEDON



INSTITUTE OF
SOCIAL POLICY

caledon
commentary

September 2000

ISBN # 1-894598-12-1

First Ministers' Last Priority*

Is it any wonder that people with disabilities are angry with governments? For years, Ottawa and the provinces have been promising 'action' on the disability front. We've had reports from task forces, reviews, commissions, working groups and parliamentary committees; more trees have been felled in the name of disability than any other cause. If only it were worth the loss.

For one brief shining moment, two decades ago, Canada was the global leader on disability. Back in 1981, the International Year of Disabled Persons, Ottawa appointed a special parliamentary committee to review all federal legislation from the perspective of disability. The committee defied overwhelming odds when it managed to get the rights of persons with disabilities included in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which took effect the following year.

The inclusion of disability in the Charter was a groundbreaking coup. Canada was (and still is) the only nation in the world that enshrines constitutional protection for persons with dis-

abilities. But since the early 1980s, progress has been halting.

This inaction is distressing, given that governments have made a written promise to work together to meet the economic and social needs of people with disabilities. It is a commitment they seem to have all but forgotten. On October 27, 1998, all governments except Quebec signed a national agreement on disability entitled *In Unison: A Canadian Approach to Disability Issues*. It set out a bold vision in which persons with disabilities participate as full citizens in school, work, culture, recreation and all aspects of community life.

In Unison identified key areas of action to achieve this vision. It said supports – everything from wheelchairs, hearing aids, and slates and styluses for writing braille to services that help with eating, moving and communicating – should be available to allow people to live independently and participate in the mainstream of society. It said we need to remove barriers that prevent people from working. And it said that

*A version of this commentary was published as an op ed in the *Globe and Mail* on August 31, 2000.

income security programs should not create income insecurity. Sometimes the best or only way to get disability supports is through income programs, such as welfare. Many people are unable to leave these programs if they have to pay for supports on their own.

There is no question that *In Unison* set forth an ambitious agenda, made more complex by the fact that its essential parts are closely intertwined. But while the agenda is big, it is not impossible. There is no excuse for the policy paralysis that now characterizes the disability field.

A daunting journey is made possible by taking small steps in the right direction. Governments can start by ensuring the availability of ‘personal supports’ – the goods and services that help offset the effects of a disability. These include special eyeglasses, prosthetic equipment and breathing devices. Attendant services assist with personal needs and homemaker services help with household chores. Respite provides relief for families caring at home for persons with severe disabilities – and even aging parents.

The current system – such as it is – defies simple description. It is a hodgepodge of arrangements delivered by governments, community groups and private companies. (Private services are primarily for the well-off who can afford the salary of a private attendant or have insurance policies to pick up the tab.) The system is anchored by thousands of unpaid caregivers, mainly women.

The problems are many and varied. The supports that may be offered in one jurisdiction may not exist in another. And even when supports are available, countless rules govern where and how these are delivered. A visually impaired teenager, for example, may be able to get reading assistance at school but not at a training program in the community. A person may qualify

for supports in his rural area – but spends the weekends in bed because these are delivered Monday to Friday between 9 and 5.

It is essential to take action on personal supports not just to help the 16 percent of the population identified by a federal survey as ‘disabled.’ All Canadians have an interest in this issue – because most of us will need some kind of assistance as we age. Despite its importance, the personal supports agenda appears far from the First Ministers’ radar screen. The irony is that this agenda links closely to health care, the No. 1 priority on their list.

In looking for ways to reform costly health care, governments should develop more community services that prevent institutionalization and enable people to live at home. An adequate system of personal supports would help fill a major gap – lack of community options for independent living – that is creating huge pressures for expensive, hospital-based care. The costs will only increase with an aging population.

If governments take action to improve the availability of personal supports, they will be making great strides on both the disability and health care fronts. It would be a shame if the sparks that flew at the recent meeting in Winnipeg prevent the First Ministers from working *In Unison*.

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