



Getting Real About Disability

(Annual Report of the Disability Officer)

It could be said that the death of the campaigning Labour MP, Alf Morris, is a sad loss to the cause of maintaining the rights of the disabled. Certainly, we've moved a very long way indeed from the 'primitive' situation that existed prior to his amazing arrival on the scene. Some of us may very well never even have heard of a man to whom millions owe their current respected status. His was a pioneering inclusive agenda. It resulted, notably, in the pioneering 1970 "Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act" It was, bear in mind, a private members Bill though it admittedly enjoyed Cabinet support! It might be thought that his campaign over more than four decades has achieved all that he had hoped it would. I doubt if that would ever have shared that opinion! Typically, he did not rest on his (many) laurels but continued to fight the cause of the socially disadvantaged almost to the end of his life. It could be said that he quite shamelessly embarrassed his socialist colleagues into conceding the need for protective and supportive legislation for the marginalized members of the community. The question of economic disempowerment was a larger and broader issue but its implications for his single-minded campaign was always fairly self-evident. At a time when 'benefits' of every sort and kind are under threat, many disabled people feel threatened by the very authorities who should be ensuring their well-being. This type of 'institutionalised neglect' is very much the '*casus belli*' (the cause of war) between campaigners like Alf Morris and those who seek to reduce or minimize the implications of legislation introduced to protect the disabled and the disadvantaged.

This recent tweet from a beneficiary of his campaign is illuminating.

"When I first got Mobility Allowance which transformed my life I didn't know that the man I had to thank was Alf Morris who has sadly died."



Ann Begg MP

By any standard, we have to say that while Alf was a man of great humility he was also a true political 'Olympian'. I think the best tribute any of us can pay him is to continue along the inclusive path he boldly pursued, surrounded, as he was, by the good and the great – ensuring that, in so far as it is practical and possible, no one would ever be made to feel marginalised by circumstances over which they had no control but which, in one way or another, had a negative impact on their quality of life.



The question I want to put to members is how we define 'disability' in terms of Chess as a pursuit, a competitive activity, an educational programme - however we choose to describe this 'eccentricity'?!

In my mind, there may be a point in talking of 'chess-ability' rather than disability as such. Anyone capable of playing chess to Club standard is scarcely disadvantaged intellectually, though there is obvious room for further improvement! There are registered disabled players who more than hold their own with their able-bodied opponents. The fascination with the issue for me is that what might seem to be a disadvantage in the majority of contexts may turn out, contradictorily, to aid the focus and the power of the Chess player. The imposed silence of the deaf person and the reliance on a kind of 'sixth sense' by the unsighted player may well assist rather than hinder concentration. I would be interested to hear the opinion of players with such disadvantages on whether they feel my suggestion resonates at all with their own experience. I don't think anyone will disagree with the proposition that Chess is, by its nature, the most inclusive of activities. It can be played at any age from 5 to 95, it can be played by anyone capable of mastering the basic rules and able to tap a keyboard or move a piece across a board, it can be played at almost any time and any place — by people, who may (as on the 'web') have only one thing in common — their shared enthusiasm for the game and a compelling desire to wipe the floor with their opponents!

What I am saying, in brief, is that what I'm giving to you today is a 'Chess-ability' report. At the top of the list must, I think, be Stephen Hilton's undeniable achievements. At the time of speaking I believe he is representing Team GB in an 'Intellectual Olympics (Paralympics) - the 14th IBCA Chess Olympiad which took place in Chennai, India, from August 9th to the 19th, 2012. I'm, of course, aware that Scotland will tough it out in the Istanbul Chess Olympiad taking place from August 27 to September 10, 2012 and that our Juniors are in Prague for the Euro Youth Age Championships from 16th-26th August 2012. Good fortune attend them all (!) What I would add, however, is that our noble IBCA Secretary has been involved in a tournament that would be seriously challenging for any player at or below SCO 2100. I would also want to congratulate him on obtaining sponsorship to cover the expense of his expeditions abroad and obtained, incidentally, because of the reputation he has established for himself over the past decade, as a very capable (though registered blind) player.

On the same theme of the way in which disability seems to challenge all our misconceptions, I watched a 'legless' player run in an Olympic event designed for able-bodied athletes. He didn't win the event but, for me, it was an heroically emphatic statement that disability should never ever be equated with aspirational dumbing-down. A blind person climbing Mount Everest might seem a step too far, literally and figuratively yet it's been done. I did meet a blind guy, last September, who'd climbed Mount Kilimanjaro with a little help from his friends. A blind person riding a bicycle? I don't actually believe this, but Stephen has firmly assured me that it's already been done. In my opinion, one of the most exciting aspects of all this 'dis-ability' stuff is the way in which technology seems to be progressively intervening to further enhance the life-experience of people with mental and/or physical impairment. Stephen has recently acquired, for example, a 'talking' digital Chess clock that advises him of the time taken by both players as and when he requests it. We've a little way to go to produce a sensory board that allows the pieces to 'announce themselves' (quietly via earphones!) when touched by an unsighted



player but I've checked and, technically speaking, it is a perfectly feasible project. Anyone with a double impairment obviously faces what I presume to call the 'Helen Keller' challenge. I'm sure that, given time, even that serious disadvantage, will be reduced, to an appreciable level in its severity by the Wonderful Wizard of App! Incidentally, I was very encouraged to see John D playing in a recent weekend Congress held, as a part of the Scottish Championship 'bonspiel' at the Trades Hall in Glasgow. I was equally impressed by the communication going on, seemingly by touch alone, with his female assistant. I will assume, unless advised otherwise,, that it was exclusively on the subject of chess! 😊

It would be tempting, though quite inaccurate, to suggest that the only limitations disabled people actually face, nowadays, are those others place upon them or that they choose to place upon themselves. It is insulting to measure achievement in the field of disability with performance indicators that are only truly appropriate in the context of the able-bodied. However, it seems to me that the particular virtue of Chess is that we can, if you wish, be as unpatronisingly critical of or as impressed with, for example, Stephen Hilton's play as we can of any other player graded at a similar level. There are, of course, blind or sight-impaired GMs and they neither seek to be nor are prepared to take prisoners – any more than any sighted player does or would! Where concessions are appropriate, then by all means, let's have them but I think, in the case of Chess play, these concessions need to be balanced by the reality that what may appear to be a disadvantage in other contexts may not necessarily be so or may not be so to a degree which demands radical modification to standard play.

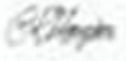
We have, I think a continuum from the mildly impaired individual who is not officially registered 'this' or 'that' or 'anything' to the individual who is doubly impaired, requiring a personal assistant, a Braille board and, obviously, extra room if also wheelchair-bound. In my experience, most organisers cope with all these 'balancing acts' very well indeed.

Access is an issue that is now on every organiser's agenda. I know of only one well-known venue that, for a number of mainly historical reasons, has not been able, so far, to meet the requirements of current legislation in that regard. There are obvious implications with the new PVG regime for disabled people but, in some respects, I think the new regime is achieving a much more sensible and realistic balance between protecting vulnerable groups and operating the bureaucracy needed to ensure that such protection is enforced.

For members' information, I attended a great get-together in Glasgow's Royal Concert Hall on the 30th of September last year. It was the AGM of 'Inclusion Scotland' - support for which I would recommend to anyone with the slightest interest in disability issues. As the name implies, it is a campaigning 'umbrella' organisation. I attended it as Stephen's representative (wearing his IBCA hat) I would actually hope that we could look at some form of direct link-up, as a National organisation, with this marvellous organisation, which is also substantially funded by the Scottish government. Its key mantra is the empowerment of the disabled by with and for the disabled. In that respect its mission is close, surely, to the mission upon which Alf Morris embarked so courageously four decades ago!



I don't , at this point, know who my 'boss' will be but what I want to do, here and now, is thank Stephen sincerely for his patience, understanding and support over the past three years and to recommend that the on-going work of 'spreading the message' be continued and developed in the next three years with the full support of the incoming Home Director and all members with an interest in and care for Chess as, very possibly, the most inclusive internationally recognized 'intellectual sport' in the world



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