

Making rights a reality - Implementing the UN Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities

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It feels very good to be here today sharing our hopes and plans for the UN Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities. The Convention is such a major milestone in our journey for disabled people's emancipation.

It is difficult to get across the purpose and significance of the Convention in a nutshell. So difficult in fact that I am going to draw on somebody else's words.

That person is my colleague Andrew Lee, who gave evidence to a recent Joint Committee on Human Rights report on people with a learning disability.....

Andrew said:

'I think of life as a person with learning difficulties as being taken to watch a football match, where life is that football match, and never being

allowed to join in. People with learning difficulties have the same dreams, inspirations and aspirations as everyone else but we are held back from engaging in life. If you think of your most cherished moments in life, of the things that you still look back on and smile, I expect it is something that people with learning difficulties would get held back from doing.'

Andrews profoundly moving comments remind us what this Convention truly aspires to - that disabled people around the world be held as equal in worth. That we be treated with dignity and respect; have the means and opportunities to achieve our dreams while participating fully and making a valued contribution to society.

In short, that disabled people live life to the full.

This UN Convention is a statement of these international values. It is a testimony to the remarkable achievements and solidarity of disabled people worldwide, for without their efforts there would be no convention.

But Andrew's comments, and the wider report of the Joint Committee, also remind us how far we have to go to make these rights a reality here at home.

If these rights were already reality, Brent Martin and John Hoskins, men with learning disabilities targeted, exploited, tortured and murdered, might be safe and participating fully in their communities.

If these rights were already reality, incidents of physical and sexual assault against adults with learning disabilities in long stay hospitals or other institutions would be dealt with immediately by criminal justice agencies.

If these rights were a reality, people with mental health problems or learning disabilities would not avoidably die earlier because of unequal access to healthcare.

And if these rights were a reality, disabled people would have meaningful opportunities to be in control of their own lives, to make choices and participate in their communities, instead of being imprisoned in their front room watching endless daytime TV.

If these rights were a reality, much of what is in the Joint Committee's report would not be.

If these rights were a reality Leslie Burke would not be fighting Drs in a High Court for reassurance that he will not be dehydrated or starved to death.

Making these rights a reality for all disabled people has to be our shared task.

We hope that the government will sign up to the convention with no reservations at all and we want to work with them to try to achieve this.

One of the ways that we can make the convention a practical reality is to allow individuals to use the mechanism created by the convention to take their cases to the United Nations. This would ensure that the rights in the convention are properly tested.

We would like to suggest that this convention, along with the other human rights UN treaties, are used as the basis for rights in the proposed - Bill of Rights for Britain.

We hope that the Commission will play a formal role in making these rights a reality in becoming Britain's independent body, requiring us to promote, protect and monitor the Convention.

In practice this means that we will promote awareness of these rights and human rights more generally amongst all disabled people whatever their impairment.

In our work to promote the value of equality and human rights to public authorities and the public more widely, we will also promote the Convention.

It means we will use the Convention in relation to the way we use our legal powers.

It means we must independently monitor Britain's performance in relation to making these rights a reality, including via our tri-annual State of the Nation report into equality and human rights in Britain.

Perhaps most importantly, it means we will use the Convention to inform our priorities, our policies and the way we seek to influence change.

And as change is what we are here to discuss I wanted to finish by setting out just some of the changes the Commission will pursue over the coming year to make the Convention rights a reality.

We have launched a major Inquiry into the operation of human rights amongst Britain's public bodies, as well as understanding better the attitudes of the public to human rights so that we can promote human rights effectively.

We will support the Joint Committee on Human Rights recommendation in relation to human rights in health and social care by asking the Government to legislate so that the new Care Quality Commission is required to make the promotion of human rights its primary goal. In fact we have already started! On Tuesday evening many Peers in the House of Lords, including me, called for a human rights framework to underpin the new combined health and social care commission. The health minister Lord D'Arcy was obviously struck by our intent, and I am looking forward to going into the Committee stage enthused by stories and human rights passion from this conference.

The equality and human rights commission will also build upon and continue to pursue the recommendations of the DRC's formal investigation into healthcare to ensure disabled people have equal access to healthcare

This year will see major reform proposals setting out the future funding and organisation of social care. We will ensure equality and human

rights are at the heart of this debate to ensure social care plays its full part in supporting independent living for disabled people and their families.

We will use our powers to ensure that disabled people are properly protected from and given adequate redress in relation to acts of violence, hostility and harassment, targeting areas of failure in the criminal justice system and elsewhere using the Disability Equality Duty.

And we will continue to develop proposals to provide disabled people with genuine routes out of poverty, including through influencing the ongoing welfare reform agenda to widen opportunities for paid employment.

These are just some of the ways the Commission will pursue implementation of the Convention over the coming year and beyond.

Just as this Convention is the product of disabled people's commitment, innovation and political skills, so we recognise that it will only become reality if these same qualities are turned to the question of implementation.

Above all else making the Convention rights a reality demands that disabled people are equal partners in its implementation.

We need to do so by getting past the idea that these are either rights held or duties owed.

Rather let's see today as marking the beginnings of a mission shared, with everyone on Andrew's football pitch, playing together to win.

Ends