

# THINK PIECE

## **“Sticks and Stones” But words are hurting!**

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Compassion, tolerance, care for vulnerable people. “Why do these “feel good” words, mainstays of the Labour lexicon, make some of us feel so uneasy?”

Partly it is that their synonyms are not so attractive; to think that someone is pitying you or putting up with you and that they are doing this because they see you as weak, is not a good feeling. But this is not the whole reason. It is also because these words are chosen in favour of other words – Human rights, equality, and service entitlements for those who need them.

The language used also helps to define the relationship between the governed and the governing. Comfortable, feelgood words can take this relationship backwards, not forwards. Service User’s who are young and old disabled people, do not require “compassion” for our impairments. We want rights and equal treatment. We do not want to be “tolerated”, we want protection from discrimination. We do not want to be typecast as “vulnerable” in order to get daily help in our lives. We want services relevant to our needs.

Tolerance is not the same thing as acceptance, it is certainly not equality. (The official Church of England position on “tolerating” homosexual clergy is but one illustration of this.) Tolerance is an important virtue, but social policy based on tolerance rather than rights leaves some people as second or third class citizens, tolerated but not embraced in their community.

Compassion can be valuable - if its meaning is not just to sympathise with other people’s distress but to act, to alleviate it. It needs to

recognise that for many people distress is caused by wholly preventable factors. For example, people who become housebound often become depressed. Improving access to the local environment, restoring their contact, is a more appropriate response than sympathy or counselling.

People are vulnerable at times, but this is a transitional state, not an absolute one: if you stay out all night in sub zero weather, you are vulnerable to hypothermia. If a loved one dies you are vulnerable to deep sadness. This does not define you as a chilly or a sad person! But people who will get sick if someone does not get them out of bed or fetch them a meal, and who turn to statutory services to cover this need, find themselves categorised, defined, as vulnerable. Services for "vulnerable" people treat their recipients as passive, and result in perpetuating dependency.

What matters about all this is not that some woolly words make us feel queasy. It is that the thinking behind them produces the wrong solutions.

In recent years, among ourselves disabled people have developed all sorts of ideas and insights, relevant to both disabled and non-disabled people. We have, for example, designed new methods of providing services, which enable people with significant impairments to work and live independently. At one level, government recognises this, in its support for direct payments, for example.

But at another level, it often sounds as if those in government are turning away from the progressive, transformative potential of communities, such as the disability movement and other service user movements, and focusing purely on our problems. This is damaging in all sorts of ways. Good policies about promoting independence are undermined if those charged with implementing them believe that service users are inherently dependent. Valuable user involvement in service development is thwarted if service managers believe that users are incapable. Worse, some service providers seem to ally concepts of vulnerable and needy with demanding, in a curious way to make being in need into a socially irresponsible act. Many service users are seen as a drain on resources, creating a problem in managing budgets. The human rights issues are invisible.

Words matter. It is convenient to have a collective adjective to describe consumers of welfare services, but it is also dangerous. In order to use education services we do not have to be defined as "ignorant" (even if in

one sense we certainly are - else we would not require the education.) Although “vulnerable” is not used in a pejorative sense (as “ignorant” can be) it is still a loaded word. It should be used with greater selectivity and greater sensitivity.

In conclusion, I want to leave you with Confucius

*One day a disciple asked him “If a king were to entrust you with a territory which you could govern according to your ideas, what would you do first? Confucius replied, “My first task would certainly be to rectify the names.” On hearing this the disciple was puzzled “Rectify the names? And that would be your first priority? Is this a joke?”*

*Confucius explained, “If the names are not correct, if they do not match realities, language has no object. If language is without an object, action becomes impossible – and therefore, all human affairs disintegrate and their management becomes pointless and impossible. Hence the very first task of a true statesman is to rectify the names.”*