Book Reviews

Recensions

About Canada: Disability Rights

Deborah Stienstra
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The latest addition to Fernwood's *About Canada Series* is written by Deborah Stienstra, a professor of disability studies at the University of Manitoba. In this small book (125 pages), she introduces the reader to disability rights and policies in a Canadian context. From the start we are reminded that disability is a social construct created by attitudes and assumptions about difference and impairment rather than by the impairment itself.

Much progress has been made since the late 1970s in the fight for disability rights but much remains to be accomplished. Too often, social policies have been instituted without involving people with disability in the decision-making process. Faced with this situation, people with disabilities have learned to advocate for themselves and have set-up resources where peer support can be accessed to live more independently.

At the federal level, since the 1998 *In Unison* report, it is recognized at least in principle that disability is a social creation and that government and other actors must strive to remove stigma and ensure inclusion. Some interesting tax measures have been introduced, such as in 2004 with the Registered Disability Saving Plan. But, of course, the tax policy direction has its limits for people living with low income.

At the provincial level, since the 2000s, the programs and policies relating to disabled people have varied widely. Still, we can see some movements in the right direction in jurisdictions, such as in PEI, where disability support programs have be affranchised from the connection with social assistance. But again much remains to be done to treat people with disability as full citizens, regardless of where they live in the country. Too often, moving from one province to another will mean that you must return your wheelchair obtained under the aegis of a provincial support program and reapply elsewhere in the hope of accessing similar support. Negotiating the jurisdictional maze is likely to be more complicated if you are an Aboriginal person with a disability as was tragically illustrated by the case of Jordan River Anderson in Manitoba.

In chapter 2, Stienstra reminds us of the plights of people with disability who fall through the cracks of an ill-organized system. The tragic stories of Brian Sinclair, Ashley Smith, Cory Moar and Tracy Latimer speak to us about the deaths of "invisible" disabled people who were set aside, neglected, harmed or abused. While they were citizens, they did not seemed entitled to rights nor worthy of protections. Perhaps this is caused by the prevailing (but unfortunate) view that in some cases you are "better dead than disabled"? Here the author stresses how we need to shift our thinking when she writes: "It is not about 'dying from' but rather *living with* disability." (p. 36)

To live a good life with disabilities is possible, however, and in chapter 3 Stienstra identifies education, employment, transportation, telecommunication, and health care as the five key areas that form the building blocks for full inclusion and participation of people with disability. The treatment given to the education issue is interesting because it touches briefly on what I would call the *inclusion versus specialized education* debate. Unfortunately, the author simply takes the now conventional view in favor of inclusion (which I share) without paying any attention to the arguments of those, like some parents of severely disabled children, who favor the specialised approach. This is a missed opportunity to address the fact that there are debates within the disability rights movement, that it is not a monolith and that it is worth looking at some minority positions within this movement.

The complexity and diversity of the situation is better captured by the author regarding (un)employment where age and type of impairments (among other factors) play a role. For instance, we learn that people with hearing impairments have the lowest unemployment rate among people with disability (p.51). Little progress is likely to occur on the employment issue (and ultimately on poverty) without significant improvement in workplace accommodations and accessible transportation. Transition measures from social assistance to work must also exist to enable people with disability to climb over the "welfare wall", for instance by not losing their prescription drug coverage and supplementary health benefits the minute that they find employment and leave the welfare rolls.

Accessible public transportation is another key issue for the social and economic inclusion of people with disability. Imagine being blind and trying to figure out where to get off the bus when none of the stops are called out!

Perhaps more optimism is warranted when looking at telecommunication and information technologies where there is the potential to remove a number of barriers for people with disability as noted by Stienstra (p.67). Here the principles of universal design can be used in the development of new equipment to ensure a wider audience for devices.

In health care delivery we still find significant barriers for people with disability and a fair dose of paternalistic attitudes towards them. The landmark *Eldrige* decision of the Supreme Court of Canada regarding the provision of sign language interpretation for deaf people offers hope for some much needed change. Interestingly, the author cites the findings of MaryAnn McColl that point to greater accessibility and willingness to make accommodations for people with disability in medical practices in which physicians are paid salaries rather than fee for services. This is another example that different incentive structures can produce different outcomes in health care delivery.

In chapter 4, Stienstra stresses that there is a gap between the theoretical rights and the actual lives of most Canadians with disability. To close that gap people with disability need to enhance their capacity to claim their rights. According to the author, three solutions can be found in universal design, disability support, and income support.

Universal design has made some considerable headway and it is not unusual for sidewalks in Canada to have curb cuts that facilitate the movement of not only people with disability but also parents pushing strollers or kids on rollerblades. That is the idea behind *universal* design. Making a door large enough to accommodate a wheelchair user does not prevent anybody else from walking through that door! Yet, still very few houses are built with these larger doors while the cost of doing this would be marginal if the practice was generalized through the building codes. In the IT sector, progress has been made and voice commands can be enjoyed…universally.

The issues of disability support and income support are perhaps more problematic, especially in a federal country like Canada with a relatively rigid division of power between the orders of government. This calls for a level of federal-provincial-territorial cooperation that is rarely seen. The author is enthusiastic about the idea of having a national (i.e., federal) income support program for people with disability that would free-up the provinces to focus their attention on disability support programs. While this is a worthwhile recommendation, its implementation in our federal system is likely to take a lot of time.

A more modest, but very innovative, proposal made by the Caledon Institute is concerned with a basic income plan (similar to the GIS) targeted to people living with severe disabilities. It has some momentum and should be discussed further.

The social inclusion of people with disability is not only a policy matter it is also a challenge for all of us to create communities that are welcoming to people with disability. This inclusion begins by listening to people with disability and respecting the choices these individuals make.

In the fifth and final chapter, Stienstra returns to the importance of recognizing human diversity in order to look at people with disability in a different way. We can then appreciate that the challenges of disabilities can present a source of social innovations in a world where we are all connected and where solutions to many disability issues can benefit us all. Unfortunately, the current neoliberal ideology is one that views the world through the lens of independent and self-sufficient individuals. In this perspective it is too easy to construct a discourse on disability that separates the normal “us” from the disabled “them”. But there is hope. With the aging of the population, paradoxically, most Canadians (including myself) now have people with disabilities in their lives. Solidarities are growing and slowly erasing the stigmas.

Disability Rights is an introductory book that contributes to making the invisible visible. It provides some light on issues that are not discussed enough in our homes, in workplaces, and in schools. It is a tool for the transformation of Canadian society.