TRANSCRIPT Disability Activism in Canada

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This lesson focuses on identifying key moments and shifts in disability rights and justice movements in Canada. Let's start by considering how the Canadian state understood disability before the emergence of movements for disability rights, justice, and inclusion. Dr. Janet Phillips conducted research on changing approaches to mental health and illness in Canada. Phillips explains that, in the late-19th and early 20th centuries, the emerging Canadian state identified those variously labeled "lunatics", "idiots", "deaf", "dumb", "blind", and "feeble-minded" as social *problems* in need of *containment*. In 1906, for example, the Government of Canada stipulated that "any person who: 'is feeble-minded, an idiot or an epileptic, or who is insane, or has had any attack of insanity within five years'" should be prevented from immigrating to Canada. Further, the government limited people who were "'deaf and dumb, or dumb, blind or infirm" from immigrating to Canada unless that person had a family to support them (Peers, 2015: 51). The Canadian state tried to contain mental abnormality or 'lunacy' by opening insane asylums, later renamed "hospitals" (Phillips, forthcoming). In the early 1900s, asylums or "hospitals" were overcrowded -- treatment did not seem to be containing the problem of 'insanity'. At this point, the field of psychiatry shifted to a focus on "mental hygiene". Mental hygiene focused on educating children to become mentally sound and physically strong. At the same time, eugenics emerged as an ideology and practice rooted in faulty logic based on the assumption that mental and physical abnormalities are genetic. The label 'feeble-minded' described people who were amoral, who spread disease, and who could not be assimilated. Eugenics policies aimed to prevent people deemed 'unfit' or 'feedble-minded' from reproducing, often through forced sterilization programs. Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Kinesiology, Sport, and Recreation and Canada Research Chair in Disability and Movement Cultures, Dr. Danielle Peers explains that those labeled mentally or physically 'defective' served a crucial purpose in Canadian nation building: that is, they became the "other" against which the ideal, white, able-bodied, self-sufficient Canadian subject is defined.

Dr. Peers explains that the Canadian state's approach to physical and mental 'defectives' changed after the First and Second World Wars. Soldiers returned from the First World War with shell shock, physical injuries, and illnesses.   Because disabled people had always been understood as 'defective', criminal, or amoral, the Canadian state had to find a way to reconcile these injured soldiers with a vision of national identity that had always privileged the 'self-sufficient', hard working citizen. Peers explains that the Government of Canada reconciled these conflicting approaches by portraying injured soldiers as *inspirations* for Canadians -- models of Canadian heroism and virtue who can overcome their conditions. Thus, Peers shows that there is a relationship between *inspirational* models of disability, whiteness, militarism, and masculinity, demonstrating how understandings of disability are always impacted by race, class, nation, and gender. Further, Peers explains the problem with 'inspiration' narratives: they always implicitly contrast the 'inspirational' disabled person against the uninspiring disabled person, creating an unattainable standard to which all disabled people must strive.

From its outset, movements for disability rights and justice have struggled to shift binary narratives of disabled people as either inspirational or defective, 'special' or 'just like you and me', the objects of charity or people capable of self-sufficiency.   For example, the Canadian Association for Community Living (CACL) formed in 1958 to advocate for the deinstitutionalization of people with intellectual disabilities. By the 1950s, new pharmaceutical treatments were enabling people to live in the community, and hospitals for those deemed 'insane' were expensive and overcrowded. In the 1950s and 60s, there was a shift towards *deinstitutionalization*. For example, in 1967, the Alberta Government commissioned the University of Alberta Psychology Chair W.R.N Blair to study mental health and illness services in the province. The "Blair Report", released in 1969, made 189 recommendations, among them "an end to segregation and stigma of the mentally ill". But, as Janet Phillips explains in her research, provincial governments did not put community supports in place to help those transitioning from institutions to the community. As such, many people ended up homeless or in prison. This example helps explain the focus among disability rights advocates for appropriate services that support all people equally, avoid disabling and excluding people.

In the 1970s, disabled activists and communities provided a new way of thinking about disability, access, and inclusion: the social model of disability.   A social approach to disability emphasizes that people's bodies and minds are not the source of the problem, or things in need of fixing. Rather, a social model emphasizes that the problem lies in society, including attitudes, policies, and barriers that actively *dis*able people. Social models of disability emphasize that "the line between disabled people and non-disabled people is not as clear as the mainstream society would like to think" (Chivers, 312). People's identification as disabled can change over time -- if one lives to be very old, they will most likely experience some form of disability. As such, some disability activists use the language of "temporarily able bodied" as opposed to "able-bodied". Disability advocacy groups in the 1970s used a social model of disability. In 1973, disability activists founded People First of Canada, which emphasizes self-advocacy for "people who have been labeled". In 1976, activists formed the Council of Canadians with Disabilities (CCD), which gave structure to a national disability advocacy movement that challenged provincial and federal governments to consider what inclusion looks like. In 1979, disability activists staged a successful protest on Parliament Hill, demonstrating that the centre of government in Canada is physically inaccessible to wheelchair users. Dr. Sally Chivers explains that protestors "climbed and leapt out of their wheelchairs onto the steps and across the entranceways of buildings". The protest prompted Members of Parliament to pass a resolution to create more accessible spaces.

In 1980, a Parliamentary Special Committee on the Disabled and the Handicapped released the *Obstacles Report* which outlined 130 recommendations regarding the full integration of people with disabilities into Canadian society. In 1981, disability rights activists successfully pressured MPs to include disability as a protected ground in section 15 of the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. Section 15 reads: "Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability." In 1986, the federal government passed the *Employment Equity Act*, with a focus on removing systemic barriers impeding

the success of people with disabilities, visible minorities, Aboriginal peoples, and women in federally regulated workplaces.

One of the big achievements of the disability rights movement has been making voting more accessible. The Canadian Disability Rights Council argued successfully in a 1988 court case that people labeled mentally disabled should not be disqualified from voting. Meanwhile, polling stations were inaccessible for many people who were disabled by polling stations with steps and ballots unreadable for blind people, for example. Thanks to disabled activists, parliament passed Bill C-78 in 1992, which made voting more accessible by providing mobile polling stations, mail-in ballots, making sure polling stations are wheelchair accessible, providing ballots in braille, and sign language interpreters at polling stations.

Canadian governments at the provincial and federal levels and international bodies such as the United Nations have released policy reports aimed at making society more inclusive and accessible. For example, in 1998, a coalition of federal, provincial, and territorial ministers released *In Unison: A Canadian Approach to Disability Issues*, which aims to provide a 'blueprint for promoting the integration of persons with disabilities in Canada'. In 2006, the United Nations adopted the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*. The Convention focuses on shifting narratives of disabled people from "objects of charity, medical treatment, and social protection" to disabled people as "subjects with rights" and "active members of society". Canada signed the convention in 2006, and ratified the convention in 2010, which means that Canada agreed to: ensure its laws and policies do not discriminate against persons with disabilities; work proactively to create accessible spaces, transportation, services, and communications systems, and to promote employment equity and equal citizenship.

In 2018, the Government of Canada acceded to the Optional Protocol to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, meaning that disabled people can file a complaint to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities if Canada violates their rights. On June 21 2019, the Government of Canada officially passed Bill C-81 or the *Accessible Canada Act*. This federal act builds on the *Canadian Human Rights Act* to ensure that Canadians with disabilities are not just free from discrimination, but also do not encounter any barriers to full participation in society. In other words, Canada is to be accessible for everyone. Some of the guiding principles for the act are that:
- "all persons must have meaningful options and be free to make their own choices, with support if they desire, regardless of their disabilities;
- laws, policies, programs, services and structures must take into account the disabilities of persons, the different ways that persons interact with their environments and the multiple and intersecting forms of marginalization and discrimination faced by persons; [and]
- persons with disabilities must be involved in the development and design of laws, policies, programs, services and structures".

In September 2020, the Government of Canada committed to a new Disability Inclusion Plan, which includes:
  - a new Canadian Disability Benefit;

- a robust employment strategy for Canadians with disabilities with a focus on training, employment supports, barrier removal and the business case for disability inclusion; and,
- development of a new, inclusive process to determine eligibility for federal government disability programs and benefits – one that reflects a modern understanding of disability.

While these are positive steps, disability activists note that there is often a sense of "deja vu" when it comes to government announcements about the removal of barriers. Disability activists call for an attention to the ways ableism -- the system that privileges people with able bodies -- interacts with colonialism, racism, and sexism to structure people's experiences. Further, disability activists continue to stress the need for changing attitudes about disabled people. Finally, in the current context which emphasizes mental health as something which everyone can nurture and maintain through 'self-care' practices, there is a need to talk about mental illness, as something that poses real barriers that cannot be eradicated simply through 'self-care', but necessitates structural change.