

## Chapter 1a

# 1970-80: How Blind People Took Back Control of RNIB

In the late 1960s an extraordinary and radical notion was growing on the periphery of RNIB which would result in the transfer of governance from the hands of the sighted to blind people. To start at the end: in 1975 the Executive Council (EC), the body legally responsible for governing RNIB, transformed its composition to contain 30 blind representatives of organisations of blind people in addition to 14 individual blind council members out of a total of 111 sitting members. By the time I arrived in 1983 it was a whipped group of 30 voting as a block, with the regular support of many of the individual blind council members. It effectively controlled the trustee council on the majority of issues. It even met the evening before council to decide the line to be taken on major issues, which usually carried the day.

Viewed many years later this transformation may not look radical, but at the time it was for two main reasons, one external and one internal. First, none of the other major disability service charities, such as Royal National Institute for the Deaf, Scope (then the Spastics Society), Mencap, Leonard Cheshire and Guide Dogs for the Blind Association (GDBA) were near to giving the controlling influence in governance to their beneficiaries, and certainly not to formal

representatives of their beneficiaries. Their related beneficiary membership organisations (organisations 'of' where the majority of trustees are relatedly disabled) were kept at a safe distance. As late as 2011, some in the above charities still did not have governance in the hands of formal representatives of their beneficiaries.

The internal reason that this was a radical change for RNIB was the conservative character of RNIB – not for RNIB the radical campaigning advertising of the then Spastics Society.

How did this progressive change come about, against the external norm and in such an internal conservative setting? Researching this part of RNIB's history involved discussion with over 30 people who were active at the time, both staff and trustees, blind and sighted, conservative and radical; and reading the minutes of all the Executive Council, committee and formal one-off meetings. The story, as is often the case, is about able and committed people being in the right place at the right time. How they became so able, and who put or allowed them into the right place, is also significant, as is RNIB's historical tradition of democratic and accountable governance.

## **What Happened?**

On the outside, demanding greater power and authority in RNIB were the organisations 'of' blind people, predominantly the United Kingdom National Federation of the Blind (NFB or the Federation) and the National League of the Blind and Disabled (NLBD or the League). Also included were around 20 or so other special interest groups of blind people such as the Braille Chess Association, the Association of Blind Piano Tuners (APBT), Circle of Guide Dog Owners (COGDO) and, in particular, the newly formed Association of Blind and Partially Sighted Teachers and Students (ABAPSTAS) whose leaders were particularly active. The late 1960s and early 1970s was a period of renaissance and birth of organisations of blind people creating a vibrant, confident atmosphere

despite some tension between the League and the Federation. In terms of leadership, key players included: from the NFB, Martin Milligan (formerly of the NLBD), Fred Reid, Colin Low, Stan Lovell and Barbara Bussey; and from the NLBD, Tom Parker and Dan West. All these people were blind.

On the inside of the Royal National Institute 'for' the Blind, while decisions were ultimately taken by the full Executive Council of over 100 people, the lead was always given by what was in effect the executive committee called the Policy and Selection Committee. The key players included: John Colligan (sighted) who was director general until 1972 and Eric Boulter who succeeded him as the first blind director general; Lord Head (sighted), chairman until 1975; Duncan Watson, vice chairman until 1975 (blind), and then chairman; the three chairs of the standing committees (two sighted) which included another future chair, John Wall (blind); and in the background the deputy director general, Eddie Venn (sighted).

## **Timeline of Events**

### **1969**

Resolution No 16 passed at the 1969 Annual Delegate Conference of the National Federation of the Blind of the UK demanded that 50 per cent of the representatives on the governing boards of all charities whose 'sole purpose is to serve blind people' were to be blind 'representatives elected by, and answerable to, blind people'.

Contrast that call for 50 per cent with the eight per cent at the time and one can begin to understand, first, how far apart the two sides were, second, how radical, verging on foolhardy, the demand was and, third, how unreasonable, verging on outrageous, the demand must have seemed to the RNIB establishment. Add in the supremely confident air of RNIB, one of the top charities in the country in terms of size and popular affection, and I doubt that the RNIB Goliath even recognised it was looking at David, in the form of the

organisations of blind people. They were puny in comparison, with only the League having, for example, any paid staff.

### **1971**

The NFB's campaign and the rising interest from organisations of the blind wishing to become members of RNIB's Executive Council was such that the powerful RNIB Policy and Selection Committee at its 1 April 1971 meeting agreed to set up a sub-committee: 'to consider the applications for vacancies in Group D [organisations 'of' the blind] and to look into the question of participation of the blind generally with regard to the rules laid down in the Royal Charter; and to submit a report at the next meeting'.

While the NFB was a tightly directed and focussed group of players pressing the demands of Resolution No. 16 from its national conference, there was a much wider troupe playing than just NFB and the NLBD. At the beginning of 1971 ABAP-STAS (teachers) and COGDO (Guide Dog owners) were both pressing formally for membership of RNIB's Executive Council and this also helped to force the pace.

Critical to decision making in RNIB was, and is, the committee system. Discussions and decisions are formally recorded, signed off by the relevant chairs (then appositely called chairmen) and subsequently agreed as an accurate record by the full committee as minutes of the meeting, providing detailed records of the period in question. The following texts within quotation marks are taken straight from these formal records unless otherwise stated.

So, by April 1971, progress was being made and RNIB Goliath probably thought it was putting out substantial peace offerings to David, namely, the sub-committee set up on 1 April and the agreement to fill four dormant places reserved for representatives on Executive Council. This raised the formal numbers from eight to twelve. However, this was the moment when the first of David's sling shots hit home.

RNIB has traditionally been nervous of adverse national publicity (as opposed to professional and technical criticism). The next phase of the campaign was launched in

May 1971 with an NFB pamphlet entitled *An Equal Say in Our Own Affairs* (1971). This argued for blind representation on mainstream, as well as specialist, organisations impacting on blind people's lives, including local government and organisations for the blind, of which the RNIB was the largest and the primary focus. This short, 2,000-word document was covered in the then pre-Murdoch bastion of the Establishment, *The Times*, on the Saturday of the 1971 Annual Delegate Conference in May, triggered by a press release. The next day, it was covered by the *News of the World* and the *Observer*. What is more, the *Observer* article praising the pamphlet's demands was written by none other than Des Wilson, arch campaigner, founding director of Shelter and soon to lead a successful crusade against all the odds to get lead taken out of petrol.

RNIB must have been reeling with shock. Everyone went home on Friday night and by Monday the attack by the blind people's lobby was national news – the campaign was now on a publicity roll. *The World at One*, one of the most influential national BBC radio programmes, picked it up, interviewing John Colligan, then director general, and Colin Low from the Federation as equals. If RNIB ever thought they could ignore the issue, it was now impossible. Nevertheless, Colin Low reports (in a personal communication) that the interviewer briefed them beforehand in terms which asked for a 'responsible discussion' because 'there is a lot of money at stake' – meaning potential loss of donations to the RNIB caused by adverse publicity. It is unlikely that the rugged approach of the producer of *The World at One* would have naturally thought about that. It is more likely that this concern was fed to the producer from RNIB. This suggests the level of its concern, and the need to try to spike the Federation's guns as an increasingly dangerous opponent.

However, RNIB must have withstood this national attack and regained its confidence because when the sub-committee reviewing formal representation met a month later on 24 June 1971 it concluded that: 'they [RNIB] had done everything in their power in respect of ensuring a major

participation of the blind in the two groups [D and E] over which RNIB could exercise any control' (taken from the minutes of the meeting).

By way of background, the RNIB Executive Council (the then trustee body) contained five blocks of membership:

- local societies for the blind – Group A
- local authorities (which served visually impaired [VI] people) – Group B
- other national organisations for the blind (with the exception of the Guide Dogs for the Blind Association who were initially not interested and later declined an invitation to join) – Group C
- organisations of the blind – Group D (this was the group which the campaign wished to expand to make it 50 per cent of the trustee total and take the number from eight to 55 out of 110)
- individuals with a particular contribution, one third of whom had to be blind – Group E.

So, what had RNIB done which was 'everything in their power'? First, it filled four dormant vacant seats in Group D from eight up to the Royal Charter limit of twelve by accepting the applications of ABPT (piano tuners), ABAPSTAS (teachers and students), COGDO (guide dog owners) and the British Computer Association of the Blind (BCAB); second, it rejected a request from NFB for two more places on the grounds that it was inequitable for the Federation to have more places than the larger National League of the Blind and Disabled; third, it appointed a blind person to fill one of the three vacancies in Group E; fourth, it decided not to increase the proportion of seats in Group E allocated to blind people; and, fifth, it set up a further sub-committee to look at 'what improvements could be made in public relations with the blind' (in the discussion of the latter it is recorded that 'the Institute's publicity department was continually feeding information to the press but very little appeared in print' – much in contrast to the NFB's successes).

**1972**

So far, the evidence suggests that the Federation was acting largely alone or even in some tension with the League and perhaps other organisations of blind people. For example, it is unlikely that the NFB's request in the first half of 1971 for two extra seats on Group D would have gone down well with the NLBD because, if granted, it would have given the smaller Federation double the seats of the larger League. However, at his report to the NFB Executive Council in January 1972, Colin Low, on behalf of the Federation's Participation Campaign Committee (PCC), proposed that it 'should take some initiative "in bringing the organisations 'of' on RNIB Executive Council together", in advance of meetings, to "co-ordinate strategy and tactics on a number of issues of common interest"' (*Viewpoint* [March/May 1972], p. 20). Given the relative lack of success to date in achieving its goal of 50 per cent blind representation, this would be a logical tactical adjustment for the NFB, that is, to change from a solo campaign to a coalition one with its concomitant advantages and disadvantages (Bruce 2011, p. 160).

The second proposal presented by Low on behalf of the PCC was for the demand to RNIB to be modified by asking for an increase in the total number of RNIB EC members from 110 to 120 to allow an increase in the number of Group D places, without such a harsh reduction in the numbers in other categories. Once again, this is a logical tactical move to reduce opposition from other council interest groups.

The formal request for council expansion was submitted and considered specifically by the RNIB Policy and Selection Committee on 6 July 1972 but it decided to defer consideration of this suggestion until local government reorganisation had a clearer impact on the composition of Group B (representatives from local government) – clarity being anticipated in early 1973.

Any thought that the major differences on participation meant a total stand-off between RNIB and organisations of blind people or even between NFB and RNIB would be wrong. For example, on 28 October 1973 Barbara Bussey



reported to the NFB Executive Council 'that she and Mr Lovell had been making progress on Federation Resolutions not only with Mr Boulter [RNIB's blind, new director general, who succeeded John Colligan] but also with other officials and committees'. This is partial evidence of a fairly widely held view among people I spoke to and who were there at the time that Eric Boulter's arrival coincided with a thawing of some of the more icy relations, and a start of a more sympathetic hearing of the concerns and suggestions of the organisations of blind people.

Evidence of increasing co-operation between NFB and NLBD on the campaign shows in the Federation's Executive Council report of 27 January 1973 in the March/May 1973 *Viewpoint* in which it was reported that the NFB president, Ken Whitton, had agreed with Tom Parker, the NLBD's general secretary, that NFB would support the League's



**Eric Boulter (L), Director General RNIB, and Duncan Watson, Vice Chairman, during the last 3 years of talks, 1972-5.**

proposal for a Consumers Committee in RNIB. Stan Lovell also reported that NFB representatives felt 'they had made an impact' at the December 1972 meeting of RNIB EC and, in light of this, they agreed that: 'the Federation should not push for more co-opted places on institute's council and committees so long as other organisations did not do so'.

### 1973

Meanwhile, there were other attempts at dialogue and bridge building with RNIB such that, on 5 April 1973, Duncan Watson was able to report to RNIB's Policy and Selection Committee on:

a very useful discussion with three members of the group [i.e. Group D, blind representatives], who had



been elected to present verbal evidence on behalf of Group D ...

the possible creation of a new committee composed of blind users of RNIB equipment and services [the NLBD demand] ... .

The Policy and Selection Committee supported this progress and 'hoped that all necessary action for amendment of the byelaws ... would be completed by spring 1974'.

This shows an important shift in RNIB's position since summer 1971. There was now an assumption that the byelaws would have to be amended to allow the numbers in the groups to be changed; and thus a more substantial increase in Group D would be feasible. The other detail hidden in this minute is that Martin Milligan, as one of the 'three members of the group' (the other two being Stan Lovell, also from NFB, and Tom Parker from NLBD) had been drawn into the direct negotiations for the first time. Martin Milligan was one of the main drivers of NFB's Resolution No 16 in 1969, along with Fred Reid and Colin Low. He was chair of the Federation's Participation Campaign Committee and a force to be reckoned with.

Another sign in 1973 of the bridge building was the decision to circulate the minutes of the top RNIB committee, Policy and Selection, to all 100 plus members of RNIB Council (reported by the NFB representative, Barbara Bussey in *Viewpoint* [September/November 1973]). As the organisations of blind people (Group D) had no representation at that stage on this top committee, this access to the minutes gave them the detail of the committee's deliberations which the traditional oral report to Council would not have done. It may also have had the effect of muting RNIB opposition on the committee to the participation campaign because views expressed might well be minuted and thus become public – whereas before they would have remained private.

In the latter half of 1973 a more public debate on participation was triggered by an article in the September issue of

*New Beacon* (the *Journal of Blind Welfare*, published by RNIB and edited by Donald Bell and Ann Lee, assistant editor, later editor). The journal published a paper given by Jane Finnis (*New Beacon* 57, no. 678 [October 1973], pp. 254-58) at a conference organised jointly by the Library Association and the National Association for the Education of the Partially Sighted on 5 June. In it Finnis covered a wide variety of topics but one remark was to set off a vigorous debate through the correspondence columns of the journal during late 1973 and 1974.

She said, referring to sighted people who 'work with and for the blind and partially sighted', that their attitude was one of: 'Let the visually handicapped get good jobs, they say, and integrate into society and be independent – just as long as they don't want to run the show. We the sighted, who know best, will run it, and make the decisions for them.'

She continued: 'We have a right and a duty to make decisions for ourselves, in those matters which concern us. ... We don't want decisions made for us by sighted people however well-intentioned and however dedicated.'

Given Finnis' comments, there were and are very few charities who would have published such a challenging paper in what was effectively the house journal.

The paper was the catalyst for a lively, letters debate mainly from the pro participation lobby with contributions from NFB's new public relations officer, Bill Poole (two letters), Fred Reid, Hans Cohn and Stan Bell. John Wall wrote three letters in all and John Busbridge, one.

On 13 December RNIB Executive Council heard that: 'Group D members wished to submit their views and arrangements were being made for this additional evidence to be fully considered.'

## **1974**

The drama now moved into its final act. Discussions, virtually negotiations, must have been going on during the first three months of 1974 because a significantly changed set of proposals were presented on 4 April to RNIB's Policy and Selection Committee by Duncan Watson, chair of the RNIB

ad hoc committee and vice chair of RNIB. He was in a difficult position. On the one hand, he had the organisations of the blind wanting 50 per cent of the places. On the other, he had four other groups on RNIB Executive Council which could only lose seats to help this happen. He was clearly sympathetic to the demands, being blind himself and a former president of NFB. However, were he to recommend too large an increase in seats, supporters in the committee of the other groups would balk and oppose the proposals. These other groups, in combination, had the power to vote them down in council.

The minutes show a thoughtful game, reporting him as saying that, following discussions with all the groups, Groups A, B and C had agreed to accept a slight reduction in representation (turkeys voting for Christmas) but: 'although Group D members had requested voting parity by 1980 ... the increase in the Group's representation should be of a limited character'.

So, Duncan Watson's committee recommended sticking with 110 places on the Executive Council, redistributed away from the other largely sighted groups to allow Group D (representatives of blind people) to rise from twelve to 20. In addition, he recommended that Groups A and C should be urged to include more blind people in their representation, that Group E's composition with current provision for one third blind people should be changed to 'at least one third', that a Consumers Committee be established and that (blind) members' loss of earnings should be reimbursed in full when they attended meetings. This latter proposal was radical among charities, in general, then and remained so for the rest of the twentieth century.

This package was endorsed by RNIB's Policy and Selection Committee but not without some disquiet from more conservative committee members.

### **The Climax of Negotiations**

Duncan Watson had probably pushed the Policy and Selection Committee as far as he could. Would their grudging support and the enthusiastic support of the chair, Lord Head

be enough to persuade the full Executive Council to back the proposals – especially when several of them would lose their seats? Also, how would Group D (organisations of the blind) on council react – would the proposals go far enough for them?

The minutes of the Executive Council of 25 April 1974 are very full on the matter: Group D spoke with one critical voice demanding that the ‘whole membership of Group D should meet with the Policy and Selection Committee to further discuss the proposals’.

In opposition to Group D there were a number of statements paying ‘tribute ... to the extremely valuable service rendered to the Institute by sighted members and by those blind people who serve in an individual capacity ...’ – in effect a fightback from those sighted members who thought Group D were being too demanding.

Clearly the exchanges became heated and one sighted council member referred to the ‘mediocrity’ of members of organisations of the blind. The outcome was that the interim report was neither agreed nor rejected – it was ‘received’ – but it was agreed that ‘a meeting should be arranged between Group D and Policy and Selection Committee at an early date for further consideration of the proposals’.

The critical meeting took place on 13 June 1974 between RNIB’s Policy and Selection Committee and Group D from which a comprehensive and revealing note exists.

On the RNIB side were Lord Head and Messrs de Silva, Dunlop, Garrow, McFarlane, Vigers and Watson. From Group D the representatives were Messrs Bower, French, Jeans, Kinder, Milligan, Parker, Perham, Price, Mrs Murkin (formerly Bussey) and Mrs Watson (no relation to Duncan). Boulter, RNIB director general, and Venn, his deputy, with Morgan (minutes) were in attendance.

The note reveals fundamental undercurrents, e.g.:

the view was expressed by some members of the Committee that the claim for parity [of representation]

appeared to indicate an intention by Group D to take over the operation of the Institute ...

reference was made to a 'rumour' that a protest demonstration might be organised unless an acceptable formula was devised by the committee. Mr Dunlop and other members of Policy and Selection Committee urged moderation.

There is no doubt a demonstration was planned, as attested to me by Tom Parker (personal communication, 1984), in 1974 general secretary of NLBD, and separately by Alf Morris MP (personal communication, 2005). In 1974 Alf had just been appointed as the world's first Minister for the Disabled in the Harold Wilson Labour government (1974-79) and he had been invited to speak at the RNIB Annual General Meeting (AGM) being held on 24 July immediately after the next critical Executive Council meeting. He told me that the League had asked him to offer support for the fight for 50 per cent representation and, in particular, to show solidarity towards the demonstration which was due to take place outside the RNIB during the Executive Council and the AGM. He said to me: 'I agreed to stop and talk to them [the demonstrators] in front of the cameras but I wouldn't agree to speak on air but the effect would have been similar.' (Personal communication, 2005)



**Alf Morris (R) Government Minister and speaker at the critical 24 July 1974 RNIB AGM, with Lord Head, RNIB Chairman.**

So, this was the background threat to the meeting on 13 June where failure would trigger a large demonstration of blind people outside the upcoming RNIB AGM on 24 July, implicitly supported by the government's minister for the disabled.

On the size of Council and the number of seats the note says: 'Following considerable discussion, members of Group D suggested that the size of Executive Council should be increased from 110 to 120 seats and that the 10 additional seats should be allocated to Group D in addition to the 20 seats [previously] recommended.'

At 25 per cent this was a significant retreat from the 50 per cent demand. Colin Low has an additional recollection. Before the critical 13 June meeting another meeting was held between the NFB, NLBD and the RNIB director general, Eric Boulter, who made it clear that 50 per cent would never be conceded. He asked what figure the protagonists would consider. A figure of one third was floated and Boulter said he would consult with his colleagues. After conferring, presumably with Lord Head and Duncan Watson (chair and vice chair, respectively) and perhaps others, he came back to the table and asked whether 30 places (25 per cent) would be acceptable. From Colin Low's recollection, it was Tom Parker (general secretary of the NLBD) who stepped in quickly to say 'Yes' – to the private consternation of NFB who felt that more might have been achieved. Fred Reid told me: 'The demand for "one third" is clearly in my mind as the demand I (still) tried finally and unsuccessfully (as president of the NFB) to push on Eric Boulter just before the date of the demonstration.' (See later.) Nevertheless, the figure of 30 was accepted by both sides and the most critical issue had been settled.

The 13 June meeting was the crunch point, but the agreed package had to be put to the Policy and Selection Committee who would decide the shape of the final package going for ratification to the Executive Council and AGM on 25 July. Policy and Selection discussed 'very fully ... the outcomes of the 13 June joint meeting' and agreed to recommend to July RNIB Executive Council that:

- EC numbers should be raised to 120 (the maximum number under the existing byelaws) from 110, comprising 30 from Group D

- the new places in Group D should be allocated by a joint meeting of the Policy and Selection Committee and existing members of Group D
- EC reconfirm its April decisions regarding a consumer committee, loss of earnings and at least one third of Group E comprising blind people
- there was no commitment in principle to 50 per cent representation.

### **The Outcome**

On 25 July RNIB Executive Council ratified the recommendations with these decisions being 'welcomed' by Group D. There was no demonstration outside the meeting.

The next stage was to apportion the allocation of the additional seats. On 16 October a joint meeting of Policy and Selection Committee and Group D decided as below. Present from the committee were Lord Head, de Silva, Hill, Spreadbury, Wall and Watson. For Group D were Bower, French, Kinder, Lovell, Parker, Price, West and Mrs Watson.

The seat allocation agreed was:

- 8 – National League of the Blind and Disabled
- 6 – National Federation of the Blind of the UK
- 2 – Association of Blind Chartered Physiotherapists (ABCP)
- 2 – Association of Blind Piano Tuners
- 2 – Association of Blind and Partially Sighted Teachers and Students
- 2 – British Computer Association of the Blind
- 1 – Worcester College Old Boys' Association
- 1 – Chorleywood College Old Girls' Association
- 1 – Royal National College for the Blind (RNC)
- 1 – Circle of Guide Dog Owners
- 4 – others from the above or new organisations as the EC might determine

**30 TOTAL**



This account gives the impression of a fairly well-ordered process. However, the threat of a demonstration and other evidence I have been given suggests that there was a great deal of anger, doubt and nervousness on both sides which left the likelihood of an agreement in real doubt until the last minute of the July RNIB Executive Council meeting. For example, Fred Reid (then president of the Federation) has told me how he and Eric Boulter had a very tense discussion over the phone; there were telephone calls to honorary officers while they were away on holiday to see whether they would be prepared to agree the package as modified; there were disagreements between the League and the Federation as to whether to call off the demonstration, with the Federation refusing to cancel until the last minute, 'even if only three of us turned up' (Fred Reid, personal communication).

Even after 25 July there was a lot of noise in the system. The 'victory of the campaign' as seen from the perspective of the leadership of NFB and NLBD was not universally recognised by their members. The London branch of NFB recorded its formal opposition to the settlement and the influence of the critics was such that the Fred Reid had to give a robust defence in *Viewpoint* (September/November 1974). Responding to the criticism that the negotiators called off the demonstration (and campaign), despite the fact that the campaign demands had not been met, he said:

This criticism is, in my view, both correct and undeserved. It is correct because it keeps fresh our ultimate objective. It is undeserved because it minimises the importance of the victory won. ... We still intend to achieve 50 per cent representation for organisations of the blind. Our judgement was simply that we could not get it this time round. ... By indicating our readiness to draw back from confrontation [the demonstration], provided the Institute came a significant distance towards us, we gained more seats than the Institute wanted to concede and proved the effectiveness of our political muscle.

The facts remain impressive. At the start of the campaign in 1968/69, 20 members of RNIB's Executive Council were blind; of those 20 only eight were formal representatives of blind people via organisations of blind people. At the end of the campaign in 1975 the 20 had risen to 44 (40 per cent of the occupied places) of whom 30 (up from eight) formally represented organisations of the blind.

The campaigners would have to wait until 2001/02 before 'parity' was achieved, when RNIB's constitution was changed to require 50 per cent of its trustees to be blind or partially sighted – when the same Colin Low of 1974 (who was made Lord Low in 2006) was RNIB chair and I was director general. Even in 2001/02 this was a radical achievement, far ahead of any other service organisation for disabled people.

## **Societal Influences for Change**

While the narrative above emphasises rightly the importance of individuals in the radical change, there were also favourable social and institutional developments which were relevant.

The 1960s and early 1970s were periods of apparent progressive social change. There was an optimistic, 'anything is possible' atmosphere in the 1960s. Blind people were as much a part of that as anyone else.

In particular, there were the beginnings of the radicalisation of the disability movement, for example, the founding of the Disability Income Group in 1965, Alf Morris' Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act 1970, pressed by disabled people, the founding of the Association of Disabled People in 1971 and of the Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) in 1972.

## **Internal Influences for Change**

### **Healthy Traditions of Participation**

Despite initially being strongly resistant to change, there were many characteristics of RNIB which helped the protagonists of change:

- RNIB had strong early traditions of the involvement of blind people (for the first 19 years, 1869-87, an Executive Council member had to be blind to be appointed [Thomas 1957, p. 13]).
- It had a tradition and established principle of blind representation. (Group D, organisations of blind people, was established as early as 1937.)
- It had a democratic and fair set of rules controlling its decision making.
- It had an accessible, semi-independent house magazine, *New Beacon*, which carried both sides of the debate.
- It had as one of its top three leaders (Duncan Watson, RNIB vice chairman) and two of its top eight leaders (Duncan and John Wall, both blind) who had crossed over previously from the demanding Group D to the group of RNIB corporate leaders. These two contributed a bridging/interpretive capacity, showing the target institution, through their own actions and competences, that the blind demanding change could produce 'responsible' and able leaders and team players.

There was a changed attitudinal climate during 1972 and 1974 which was more sympathetic to the demands of the organisations of the blind. There was the sighted John Coligan's departure and Eric Boulter's arrival as the first blind director general of RNIB in a long time.

### **The Presence of Able Blind Leaders**

If there were historical traditions and institutional capacities to be exploited, there still had to be able blind people to do this. RNIB was one of the largest educational providers, producing a blind elite who knew each other (mainly from RNIB's two residential grammar schools), were highly competent and very literate – just the force of people needed to press for, and take up, governance positions.

There were two powerful organisations of the blind: NFB with its institutional power base among the professions; and NLBD with its power base among skilled and unskilled workers and its links with the trade union movement. Each of these organisations was training a cadre of blind people well versed in team working, and competent and comfortable with negotiation, committee work, standing orders and committee rules.

In addition, these organisations 'of' had several outstanding strategists and tacticians, and astute strategies:

- Martin Milligan, a Marxist academic with astute skills of political analysis who enlisted the substantial contributions of Fred Reid and Colin Low;
- Tom Parker, an experienced trade unionist, well versed in negotiation and not frightened by confrontation; and
- a strategy which 'gave everyone something', for example, the demanded extra places were not all kept for the Federation and the League but shared out to other organisations of blind people, thus widening the support base.

### **Pressure from RNIB's Blind Consumers**

Initially, drawing on organisational minutes and resolutions, I had seen the pressure for increased representation as driven almost exclusively by the participation principle. However, discussion with some of the protagonists has given me an additional set of practical reasons – in essence the need to improve the quality of RNIB activities through the lived experience of blind people. These underpinned the participation principle and provided enthusiastic support from the blind rank and file for the leaders and negotiators. These reasons also help to explain the importance accorded to the establishment of the RNIB Consumer Committee as part of the campaign – indeed it was Tom Parker's passion, as he made clear to me when I arrived in 1983.

Fred Reid said (personal communication, 4 May 2012):

blind people at large supported the 'participation' campaign because they were very dissatisfied with some important aspects of RNIB services. The term 'consumer committee' gives the clue to one aspect of this. It had to be set up because of the heavy volume of dissatisfaction about the narrow range of assistive equipment offered by RNIB as compared to its counterparts in the USA and Germany. Tom Parker's international work revealed to him how much more in the way of watches, braille writers, etc. was available in these countries, but it was very difficult for individuals to source them, because of customs duties, methods of currency transaction, legislative restrictions on charitable bodies, etc. The solution was for RNIB to import and stock these goods along with their own products. For some reason this was resisted. So there was a practical link. Increase participation and you give a voice to the blind consumer. Another very touchy issue was the refusal of RNIB to admit guide dogs to any of its residential premises, hence COGDO's interest in the campaign and their representative, Wally Kinder's prominence in the lobbying. You can add to that the earlier resistance of RNIB to the long cane until the late 1960s. Finally, ABAPSTAS was very critical of the very small supply of scholarly texts and teaching literature, both in braille and on audio-tape. We knew of the huge supply of the latter by Recordings for the Blind in the USA and we wanted RNIB to adopt their production methods. Again this was resisted.

History is all about through whose eye you look, and I am sure the RNIB's leaders of the time would not have analysed the situation in this way. However, before joining RNIB in 1983, I spoke with several of the BBC Radio 4 *In Touch* team, including Thena Heshell (producer) and Peter White (presenter) and they painted a similar view of RNIB at that time.