# Disability activism and the politics of scale

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*In this paper, we examine the role of spatial scale in mediating and shaping political struggles between disabled people and the state. Specifically, we draw on recent theoretical developments concerning the social construction of spatial scale to interpret two case studies of disability activism within Canada and Ireland. In particular, we provide an analysis of how successful the disability movement in each locale has been at 'jumping scale' and enacting change, as well as examining what the consequences of such scaling-up have been for the movement itself. We demonstrate that the political structures operating in each country markedly affect the scaled nature of disability issues and the effectiveness of political mobilization at different scales.*

*Dans cette dissertation, nous examinons le rôle de l'échelle spatiale dans la médiation et le développement des luttes politiques entre les handicapés et l'État. Spécifiquement, nous nous inspirons des récents développements théoriques concernant la structure sociale de l'échelle spatiale pour interpréter deux études de cas d'activisme des handicapés au Canada et en Irlande. Dans ces deux études, nous analysons en particulier le taux de succès obtenu par les mouvements des handicapés dans chacun de ces pays en matière de « saut d'échelle » et pour provoquer un changement. Nous examinons aussi les retombées d'une telle augmentation d'échelle sur le mouvement lui-même. Nous démontrons que les structures politiques présentes dans chaque pays affectent profondément la nature hiérarchique des questions d'invalidité et l'efficacité de la mobilisation politique à différentes échelles.*

## Introduction

Disabled people remain one of the most marginalized groups in many developed societies. Despite this marginalization—and, in part, because of it—the last three decades have seen the emergence of a political presence for disabled people in many countries. Since the early 1970s, activists have challenged the view of disability as an individualized, medical phenomenon and rejected pity and paternalism in favour of equality and empowerment. International, national, regional and local disability organizations have emerged, although the presence and political effectiveness of these organizations varies markedly between different countries and contexts.

In this paper, we examine the role of spatial scale in mediating and shaping political struggles between disabled people and the state. We draw on recent theoretical developments concerning the social construction of spatial scale to interpret two case studies of disability activism within Canada and Ireland. A number of questions guide our work: At what scales are political (state) decisions made that impact the lives of disabled people? To what extent have disabled people been able to mobilize effectively at those scales that matter most for sociospatial justice? How successful have groups been at 'jumping scale'—whereby political claims and power established at one geographical scale can be expanded to another—and with what consequences? How has the restructuring of political scales wrought by neoliberalism influenced the nature and relative success of disability movements in different contexts? Ultimately, we focus on spatial scale to provide additional insight into the nature of disability politics in Canada and Ireland and the opportunities and challenges facing disability movements in both contexts. As such, the paper builds upon and extends research that has investigated the geographies of disability (e.g., Imrie 1996; Butler and Parr 1999; Gleeson 1999; Kitchin 2000) and social movements (e.g., Cresswell 1996; Brown 1997; Routledge 1997) more generally.

The paper proceeds as follows. We first examine recent theoretical developments in work on the politics of scale. We then discuss the development of disability movements in Western societies, thinking specifically about the significance of the movements, factors facilitating and/or constraining their success and the spatial scales at which such movements have been operating. The main focus of the paper comprises two case studies of disability activism. The first of these is in Ontario, with emphasis on the scaling up of activism from the municipality to the provincial level in a period of municipal restructuring. The second case deals with disability activism in Ireland. Emphasis is placed on the significance of political clientelism as an explanation for the relative success of activists at the local level and their relative absence at the national scale. Finally, we identify lessons for disability activism and the politics of scale.

## The Politics of Scale

Recent geographic research has challenged our understanding of spatial scale as 'unproblematic, pre-given and fixed hierarchy of bounded spaces', with theorists suggesting instead that scale be 'conceptualized as socially constructed rather than ontologically pre-given, and that the geographic scales constructed are themselves implicated in the constitution of social, economic and political processes' (Delaney and Leitner 1997, 93; see also Herod 1998; Marston 2000; Miller 2000). As part of broader developments in the theorization of social space, a number of authors have argued (1) that scale is produced by actors and therefore open to transformation *and* (2) that the discourses and actions constituting the politics of scale are a fundamental ingredient of the ways in which we go about creating, living within and struggling over a complex set of power relations present within spaces of production and reproduction (Herod 1991; Jonas 1994; Miller 2000). In addition, research indicates that the political construction of scale is not confined to the mechanisms of formal state power, but occurs across a broader range of actors, allowing for greater recognition of the role of social movements and other entities (Herod 1991; Miller 2000). As Delaney and Leitner (1997, 95) posit, scale is (re)produced and transformed through the interplay of 'context, actors, strategies, maneuvers, stakes, ideologies and time'. Thus, Marston (2000, 221) argues that as geographers, '[O]ur goal with respect to scale should be to understand how particular scales become constituted and transformed in response to particular sociospatial dynamics'.

In thinking about the social construction of scale, some recent work emphasizes the role structural forces play in shaping and reshaping scales at which political action occurs. Here, considerable emphasis has been given to the relationship between capital, globalization and a rescaling of the state at local, national and international levels. For example, Smith (1984) argues that scale is produced through the contradictory discursive and material practices of capital as expressed through the tensions of mobility and fixity, equalization and differentiation, cooperation and competition that lead to uneven development (Herod 1997). However, as Marston (2000) indicates, it is not just capital/forces of production that determine the social construction of scale. Social relations of reproduction and consumption are also central to the structure and function of different scales, including that of the household. Moreover, other scholars emphasize the importance of oppositional politics, with writers such as Herod (1997), Leitner (1997) and Miller (2000) arguing that the social construction of scale is an outcome of struggles between actors. In other words, labour (and other groups) are also involved in using and shaping scales for political action.

Struggles over spatial scale are both material and symbolic in nature. In material terms, actors make strategic decisions about the scale(s) at which their organizing and political activity should take place. Miller (2000), discussing the scaled nature of the state, argues that social movements need not mobilize at the scale at which their grievance exists if more favourable political opportunities exist elsewhere. For the same reason, actors may seek to change the scale at which material processes operate. Interrelated in complex ways with the scaling of material processes are symbolic struggles over the meaning of different scales. Drawing on the work of Henri Lefebvre and David Harvey, Miller (ibid.) argues that we can think of these struggles in terms of 'representations of scale' that offer competing conceptions of the scales at which material processes operate, as well as the (in)appropriateness of different spatial scales for the mobilization of collective actors and the articulation of political demands. In this sense, the relative potency of representations and counterrepresentations may be vital in determining the possibility for and outcome of political struggles at different scales.

Of particular interest in thinking about oppositional social movements in general and the disability movement in particular is the way in which collective political actors are able to move across or jump scales, using political gains made at one level to challenge barriers encountered at others—either to operate over multiple scales or to move to a new scale of operation at which resistance becomes more effective at engendering change (Smith 1992; Jonas 1994; Staeheli 1994; Pastor 2001). Focusing on urban social movements, Pastor (ibid.) argues that the interdependence of inner city and suburb has made the urban region a key scale for social-movement actors. Writing about the labour movement, Herod (1998, 18) argues that scaling up effectively gives campaigns or organizations access to a broader range of resources and support for a campaign. Examining the 1989 student protests in China, the mid-1980s Filipino protests against the Marcos regime and the civil-rights movement in the United States, Adams (1996, 416) documents how social movements scaled up, using telecommunications media to shift localized political struggles onto national and international stages, allowing them to challenge 'territorially bounded authority systems... [and] escape the social confines of territorial space'. Such single-issue organizing (e.g., around the environment or human rights) can destabilize traditional party politics through their failure to recognize constituent, and often national, boundaries (Agnew 1997). For Cox (1998, 2), this jumping of scales is about attempting to reconcile 'spaces of dependence' (the locales at which material events and injustices happen) with 'spaces of engagement' (the 'space in which the politics of securing a space of dependence unfolds').

Shifting the scale of struggle can be difficult for opposition movements to achieve, however, because the hegemonic construction (and enforcement) of scale by dominant interests may prevent effective mobilization at politically potent scales. For example, political systems that operate through local clientelism mean that political action at regional and national scales is difficult to enact, as power rests locally. When power resides centrally, localized political causes can fail to jump scale because they are labelled as parochial and particularized and are therefore open to belittling and suppression (Lake 1994; Staeheli and Cope 1994). Miller (1994, 404) details how the

Cambridge (Massachusetts) peace movement managed to scale up from the local to national scale, but notes that '[The] peace movement was only able to mobilize when provocative central state actions produced openings for consensus building around strongly felt grievances'; otherwise, it was effectively blocked by the state's insistence that defence policy should be debated nationally, not locally. Similarly, as Adams (1996) notes in relation to his three examples, scaling-up was only partial and largely failed to enact widespread social and material change, because the scales jumped up to did not contain the political opportunities necessary to engender change on the ground.

In the analysis below, we examine ongoing struggles between disability organizations and the state at multiple scales in different contexts. Our analysis focuses on the ways in which disabled people, as political actors, organize at existing scales, work to scale up to effect broader change and seek, in some instances, to create new scales for political action. At the same time, we focus on how the state uses its power in different contexts to constrain or deflect the political pressure of these groups, both through its control of material resources and through its ability to reshape the structure and function of different scales of political action. Recognizing the interplay of actors with differing interests and ideologies, we illustrate how scale is caught in a tension of fixing and unsettling, of stability and instability—a tension that opens up possibilities for social change by creating space for political maneuvering at the same time as it seeks to close down such possibilities. We also show how political structures operating in different contexts—namely, Canada and Ireland—shape the effectiveness of political mobilization at different scales.

## Disability Politics

Beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s, independent groups of disabled persons began to organize for social change. These disabled individuals had what Campbell and Oliver (1996, 62) describe as '[a] gradual recognition that neither party politics nor charitable and voluntary organizations were serving their interests'. Moreover, their involvement in antiwar protests, the civil-rights movement and the feminist movement contributed a collective political consciousness (Driedger 1989, 1993; Gooding 1994; Fleischer and Zames 2001).

Political mobilizations often began at the local level, with small groups articulating a collective critique of the sociospatial status quo. Over time, and through the coordinated efforts of activists, larger groups began to emerge, capable of lobbying the state at scales above and beyond the local level, using existing legal provisions where possible and coordinating mass demonstrations similar to those of other oppositional social movements. In Cox's (1998) terms, disabled people sought to reconcile local spaces of dependence through expanding their spaces of engagement.

There has been considerable geographical variation in the nature and extent of this political mobilization. In the United Kingdom, groups such as the Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation (formed in the 1970s), the British Council of Disabled Persons (formed in the 1980s) and the Direct Action Network (a product of the early 1990s) have had an important influence on disability politics at a national scale. In the United States, the Independent Living Movement had a profound impact on disability politics in the early 1970s. Other influential groups to emerge in this period included the American Coalition of Citizens with Disabilities, a cross-disability coalition of local and regional groups that formed a base for political action at the national level, and the Paralyzed Veterans of America. More recently, the direct-action tactics of Americans Disabled for Attendant Programs Today—better known by its acronym, ADAPT—have had an important impact on disability politics at federal and state levels (Russell 1998; Fleischer and Zames 2001).

In Canada, studies suggest the disability movement had its origins among local organizations formed in Saskatchewan and Manitoba in the early 1970s (Driedger 1993; Crichton and Jongbloed 1998). These organizations created the Coalition of Provincial Organizations of the Handicapped in 1976, now known as the Council of Canadians with Disabilities (CCD). The CCD had a significant political impact, notably through pressure to include disability as a proscribed ground for discrimination in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (Rioux and Frazee 1999). Other organizations have appeared in recent decades. Some are national in scale with local and provincial chapters, such as the DisAbled Women's

Network (Chouinard 1999). Others are stand-alone groups focused on municipal politics. In Ireland, while there has been activity at the local level in terms of disability politics, much of it has been sporadic and all of it has focused on local clientelism. In addition, an *independent* disability organization has yet to emerge at the national level, for reasons that will become clear in our analysis below. Instead, recent legislation has been proscribed by the European Union (EU), rather than through pressure exerted on the state from below.

Clearly, there has been considerable growth and development of disability politics in many countries since the early 1970s, with groups and organizations working at a number of geographic scales, from the local to the international. In many contexts, activists have achieved important gains in education, legal protection against discrimination, modification of the built environment and transportation. At the same time, disability movements face ongoing challenges in areas such as housing, employment and social assistance. As Chouinard (2001) notes, the existence of legal protections is no guarantee that they will be used effectively in practice. Activists also face ongoing problems in sustaining organizations and groups that comprise the disability movement. Some of these problems are direct products of the oppression faced by disabled people in everyday life, such as lack of resources, powerlessness and continued marginalization (Scotch 1988). Other problems arise from ongoing tensions between the need for a collective political identity and the diversity of people involved in terms of disability, demographics and political philosophy (McGuire 1994).

In this paper, we focus attention on the social construction of scale in different contexts, Canada and Ireland, and its significance for the nature and outcomes of disability activism. Our analysis is broadly reflective of two key traditions within the social-movement literature. On the one hand, Resource Mobilization theory places emphasis on the necessity of resources for social movements (Tilly 1977; Carroll 1997). Time, money and other resources, as well as political opportunities to act, must be available for successful mobilization. On the other hand, New Social Movements theory, identified with scholars such as Melucci (1989), focuses attention on the challenge of forging collective identities within social movements (see

also Gamson 1992). We treat these issues as interrelated and closely connected to the politics of spatial scale. At different scales, the potential for successful mobilization with the necessary resources, opportunities and collective identity varies. In resource terms, many disabled people are disadvantaged materially. While some groups receive public funding, budgets are often small, and groups rely on the work of volunteers. To what extent, then, do the material constraints facing individuals and groups limit their efforts to build political momentum concurrently at different scales? Are gains at one scale accompanied by losses at another? Structures of political opportunity also vary considerably *between* scales, and are dynamic at *each* scale. Decisions about where to focus the resources of an organization and the way in which actions at this scale are legitimated are both important influences on movement success. How does the social construction of scales in each of the contexts we examine facilitate and/or constrain disability activists' efforts to facilitate change? To what extent are disability movements able to create and exploit opportunities at different scales? Lastly, the scaling up of political activity may make the sustaining of a collective political identity more difficult. Work on mobilization around the US Americans with Disabilities Act suggests that a key challenge facing the national Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities was balancing member groups' interests to sustain solidarity (McGuire 1994). McGuire (ibid., 119) argues 'that the capacity of the group to cohere as a political community was easier to realize in the context of civil rights claims . . . than it would have been, and is, in efforts to acquire limited federal services and resources'. While not explicitly concerned with spatial scale, McGuire draws attention to links between resources, identity and spatial scale that we explore in this paper.

## Methods

Scholars have recently called for theoretically informed studies of collective action (Wilson 2001) that draw on qualitative/ethnographic data to situate social movements in context (Herbert 2001). In this paper, we compare and contrast disability movements that emerged in two different contexts. To do so, we draw on several primary sources of data. First, both of us are working with

disability rights groups and thus draw on participant observation as a key source of insight into disability politics within Canadian and Irish contexts. Our participation means that we are not 'neutral' observers, and this has undoubtedly influenced our interpretation of events. This approach is shaped by ongoing debates within the social sciences concerning the politics of research and the question of 'positionality' (Gottfried 1991; Nast 1994; Wilton 2000). Recognizing the problematic nature of scholarly claims to objectivity and neutrality, our aim has been to balance an explicit commitment to social change by and for disabled people with an understanding of the need to reflect critically on the process of change.

Additional sources of data bring in the perspective of others. In both contexts, key informant interviews were conducted with activists to understand more about the strategies and tactics of individual activists and disability organizations. In Ontario, nine people in Hamilton were interviewed about their experiences in disability activism and their perspective on the municipal and provincial disability movement. The leader of the provincial movement was also interviewed about the development of the movement and its relationship to local disability groups. In Ireland, five activists were interviewed. In both contexts, interviews were taped and transcribed in full for analysis.

Third, the fact that disability activism in both contexts was waged in the court of public opinion provided a large amount of archival material, including newspaper reports of disability organizations' actions and events. These materials were used to supplement participant observation and key-informant interviews. In the Canadian context, newspaper coverage of disability activism within the city of Hamilton was collected for a period of three decades and examined systematically to determine issues of importance, the frequency of political mobilization and the names of active individuals and organizations.

Finally, a fourth source was drawn upon in relation to Ireland. This consisted of a survey carried out by Rob Kitchin (with Paul Finn) between June and September 2001. This survey sought to determine the range, level and structuring of disabled services in the Dublin region, focusing on education, employment, housing, transport, public services and care provision provided by state, semi-state, voluntary and charity organizations. In total, 214 organizations were contacted (68 responded) and were asked to provide policy and legal documents, organization mission statements and publications. In addition, a number of key figures were interviewed and the Web sites of other organizations were examined. Pseudonyms are used throughout.

## Disability Activism in Ontario

In recent decades, disability groups in Canada have been active at national, provincial and local levels (Driedger 1993; Chouinard 1999; Rioux and Frazee 1999). Considerable attention has been paid to the federal level, in part because the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms is perceived as key to a citizenship agenda (Torjman 2001). However, other scales of government have influence over the lives of disabled people. While federal employment standards cover sectors such as banking and communications, provinces and territories have jurisdiction over most industrial and commercial activities. Provinces also control health and social-services policy and exercise influence over local transit, education and housing. In addition to the federal code, human-rights codes exist for each province. And while municipalities have traditionally had little power relative to the provinces, they exert some control over the provision of local transit and social services, as well as municipal codes (Isin 1998). Moreover, the situation has changed in recent years, with a reshuffling of responsibilities between scales of government. In this section, we look at disability activism in the province of Ontario and the city of Hamilton. We examine efforts by disability activists to scale up from municipal to provincial politics as part of a coalition pressing for an Ontarians with Disabilities Act (ODA).

Disability activism in the city of Hamilton has a long history. In 1967, local media reported that a delegation of disabled people delivered a petition to the city council requesting amendments to the building code. Activists emphasized the inaccessibility of City Hall and the fact that lack of access at polling stations meant that disabled people were sometimes stopped from voting. Similar stories appeared in the late 1960s and 1970s. In the early 1980s, local organizing was facilitated by developments at the international scale with the United Nations' declaration of 1981 as the International

Year of the Disabled Person (IYDP). A committee formed in Hamilton to organize events throughout the year brought local activists together. In the years following the IYDP, activists formed United Disabled Consumers (UDC), a group explicitly concerned with political advocacy by and for disabled people. Both interviews with group members and archival material offer some insight into the group's tactics and effectiveness. Organizers focused attention on issues of common interest to many people with disabilities, including transportation, employment and physical-access issues, something that may have been important in terms of fostering a sense of collective identity. Two people played key roles initially, sustaining the group's momentum and fostering political consciousness among members. One woman described her initial experiences in the mid-1980s:

> The people who were running [UDC]…He was blind. She had arthritis, quadriplegic in that sense. They were a little bit radical, but they taught me an awful lot. Radical in demanding better income support, and demanding accessible streets, and I'm, like, 'Do we have the right to ask for that'?

The effectiveness of the group was bolstered by the existence of an advisory committee for people with physical disabilities established by Hamilton-Wentworth region.[1] This committee, co-chaired by a city councillor and a member of the disability community, served as a forum for disability issues and a conduit through which calls for social change could be advanced.

UDC was successful in efforts to bring about material change, improving the local environment for people with disabilities. Two issues are illustrative. First, working with the regional advisory committee, UDC members lobbied for improved accessibility in the physical environment. While the city had already taken steps toward the implementation of curb cuts and other changes, the involvement of people with disabilities alongside nondisabled city planners was essential to ensure an environment that actually worked for disabled people. In addition, members lobbied for improvements to public transit in Hamilton. In 1990, several disabled people were hired by the transit authority to assess accessibility at bus stops around the city. The city introduced the first low-floor buses in the mid-1990s, although disabled people have continued to encounter problems with the city's public-transit system, a fact discussed in more detail below.

In addition to substantive changes effected by UDC, the group's activities earned it legitimacy within the context of municipal politics. This is evidenced by the frequency with which the group's name surfaces in our analysis of local media. Angela, who served as chair of the group in the late 1980s, spoke about this in an interview, saying that 'I would be called two or three times a month by the newspapers asking for the UDC slant on this legislation, that legislation'. By the early 1990s, activists in Hamilton had organized effectively, improving the quality of life for disabled people and achieving a collective political identity.

## Scaling up: the Ontarians with Disabilities Act Committee

In 1994, a group of disability activists in Toronto came together to push for comprehensive provincial legislation in Ontario that would establish and enforce standards of accessibility in employment, services, goods, facilities and accommodation. They lobbied the left-wing New Democratic Party (NDP) government and were able to secure hearings on disability rights. Frustrated by an initial lack of momentum, the activists formed the Ontarians with Disabilities Act (ODA) Committee. In 1995, the ODA committee lobbied provincial parties, seeking pre-election promises to enact a strong and effective act. All parties—including the Progressive Conservatives, who won a landslide victory later that year—committed to disability legislation within their first term.

Concurrent with lobbying efforts at the provincial parliament, the Toronto group began to forge connections with other disability activists across Ontario. Their intent was to organize a provincial ODA movement that would comprise pre-existing groups and organizations. Scaling up posed at least two challenges. The first concerned an explicitly spatial dimension of collective identity, as the group recognized that its organizing could be hindered by a perception that the ODA movement was Toronto-centric. To address this, the group sought to build the movement as a coalition of regional committees, with each committee adopting the general principles of the ODA movement but designing and implementing its own actions. A second issue

concerned the diversity of the disabled population. The question of how to foster and sustain a sense of political unity had been in the forefront of the Toronto group's thinking from the beginning. To achieve this, ODA principles were grounded in the notion of a 'barrier-free' province, which would appeal to people with many different disabilities. Gerry, the chair of the provincial committee, explained in an interview:

> At the core of the ODA is a concept, and that's the concept of a barrier-free society, so whether it's Angela in a chair, or me being blind, or Gary being deaf, we all understand what our barriers are. That's how people buy in. They want an ODA to get rid of *their* barriers [his emphasis].

At the same time, the framing of the movement's goal as a barrier-free Ontario can be seen as an attempt to articulate what Miller (2000, 140) terms a 'new representational space' at the provincial scale, one in which physical, social and attitudinal barriers to full participation were removed.

Significantly, Hamilton was the first site to organize a local ODA committee outside Toronto. Gerry described how contact was made between Toronto and Hamilton:

> A few months after we got started, we had an event in Toronto … At the end of it a woman came up to me and said: 'I've come up from Hamilton', told us who she was, and would we like her to organize an event in Hamilton. She got a bunch of people together, and we came down and spoke, and said 'How would you like to form a group?'

The proactive nature of Hamilton activists is further evidence of the effectiveness of their local organizing. The fact that a network of activists existed and that they had already enjoyed some political success at the local level meant the shift in focus from municipal to provincial politics—the scaling up—could occur relatively rapidly. Gerry identified UDC and the city's advisory committee on physical disability as key factors in the emergence of the city's ODA group.

After the 1995 election, the ODA movement spent more than two years working to hold the government to its promise to enact comprehensive legislation in its first term (Chouinard 1999). Despite the government's resistance, those involved felt their efforts were building toward change, and that they were part of a larger provincial movement. Eileen commented:

> It was the summer of 1998, I think. All across the province, it was very clear what people wanted. They still had that fire in their bellies and they still said this is what the disabled need. It was very exciting.

Successful organizing meant that the provincial movement was able to keep disability rights on the political agenda. One indication of this was the regular media coverage of ODA issues. In Hamilton, media coverage took increasing note of the ODA Committee as part of a larger provincial movement (Morrison 1995; Crone 1996; *Hamilton Spectator* 1996; Macrury 1997, 1998a, 1998b; Prete 1997; Szymanski 1998; see also Monsebraaten 1997; *Toronto Star* 1997; Lepofsky 1998; Dirks 1999).

Responding to pressure from the disability movement, the government brought forward an Ontarians with Disability Act (Bill 83) in November 1998. Members of the ODA committee condemned the bill, as it ignored the majority of barriers faced by disabled people. Bill 83 required provincial ministries to prepare annual plans for the identification, removal and prevention of barriers in their legislation, policies and programs, but there was no requirement for ministries to implement barrier-removal. Crucially, the bill was silent on the responsibilities of the private sector to recognize the rights of disabled people as workers and consumers. The bill was also condemned by opposition parties and was subsequently withdrawn.

In 1999, the Progressive Conservatives won a second provincial election. The ODA movement again began to press for substantive disability legislation (De Mara 1999; *Toronto Star* 1999). In response, the government introduced a second Ontarians with Disabilities Act (Bill 125) in November 2001. Public statements by the government emphasized their commitment to a barrier-free province, drawing on the new representational space articulated by the ODA committee. The preamble to the bill, for example, contained the following statement:

> The Government of Ontario is committed to working with every sector of society to build on what it has

already achieved together with those sectors and to move towards a province in which no new barriers are created and existing ones are removed (Ontarians with Disabilities Act 2001).

However, the legislation still failed to address many of the issues identified by the ODA Committee. Discussion of barriers in the bill was largely limited to physical barriers, with little mention of social barriers. The bill was again concerned exclusively with the public sector.

Of significance for a scale analysis is the fact that Bill 125, which was passed into law, places considerable emphasis on the role of municipalities in facilitating access for people with disabilities. The bill requires municipalities with populations of 10,000 or more to prepare accessibility plans to address 'the identification, removal and prevention of barriers to persons with disabilities in the municipality's by-laws and in its policies, programs, practices and services' (Ontarians with Disabilities Act 2001). Plans are to be updated annually, with emphasis placed on steps taken to identify and address barriers. Public-transit operators are required to prepare similar accessibility plans. Municipalities are also expected to establish accessibility advisory committees, made up of people with disabilities, to provide input on the implementation and effectiveness of plans.

The inclusion of municipalities in the bill can be interpreted as necessary and appropriate, given the role that local governments play in people's lives. Moreover, responsibilities given to municipalities under the act are similar to those duties assigned to provincial ministries. Yet the focus on municipalities can also be interpreted more critically. The requirement to establish an advisory committee on disability, for example, failed to acknowledge that a significant number of municipalities—including Hamilton—already had committees in place. The emphasis on municipalities also needs to be situated within ongoing changes in the structure and content of political scales. In recent years, provincial downloading has meant that municipalities must now meet a greater proportion of the costs of services and programs including housing, child care, transportation and social assistance (Dale 1999; Sancton 2000). In this context, the emphasis on municipalities can be interpreted as being a way for the province to eschew responsibility for change.

The theme of municipal responsibility permeated statements made by the Minister for Citizenship prior to the bill's introduction. Meeting with Hamilton activists in September 2001, the Minister made repeated reference to the importance of having municipalities on board. Noting that it would be hard to secure municipalities' compliance with the legislation, he expressed interest in establishing a provincial enforcement agency but cautioned that the agency would be unable to *force* municipalities to change; it could not be a 'disability police'. These statements imply not only that the municipal scale is where substantive improvements in access can and should occur, but also that it is municipalities, rather than the province, that are reluctant to support disability rights. Thus, the provincial government's public statements endorsed the goal of a barrier-free province, yet the Minister's comments implied that the province was not the most *appropriate* scale for change to occur, and the wording of the bill assigned considerable responsibility for material change to local government. We now examine the impacts of provincial government policy on the municipal scale as a context for collective action.

## A changing context for disability activism

**Disabling policy changes:** The ODA movement worked hard to secure a promise from the Progressive Conservatives for disability legislation, and its organizing meant that the government could not simply renege on this promise following its election to power. However, policy changes implemented by the government produced an increasingly disabling social environment. General welfare benefits were cut by 21.6 percent in 1995, and new requirements for disability benefits were introduced two years later. The government repealed the provincial Employment Equity Act in the same year, and abandoned a policy stipulating that new buses had to be accessible in order to qualify for provincial subsidies (Walkom 1997; Orwen 1998). This latter change is painfully ironic in light of Bill 125's requirement that public-transit services prepare plans to address barriers to disabled users. The government also reduced funding for the provincial Human Rights Commission, despite pre-election promises to the contrary (Chouinard 1999). Municipal parallel-transit systems have faced

increasing financial pressure with downloading (Bell 2001). Hamilton's DARTS program cut more than CAD$200,000 from its budget and currently has a two- to three-week waiting list for 'nonessential' trips.

These changes affected the ability of people to function as political actors and, in turn, may have impacted disability activism in contexts such as Hamilton. The transit issue provides a good example, since organizing and collective action is often contingent upon an ability to come together as a group. Dave, a disability activist, stated angrily:

> Our most pressing problem is the lack of sufficient DARTS trips. Now that DARTS requires us to book three weeks in advance, we may as well be shut-ins! Does anyone know what he or she'll be doing three weeks from now? Of course not.

Moreover, problems with transportation were also demoralizing to activists who had spent considerable time in the early 1990s working to improve the transit system.

UDC, which had been an important base for Hamilton's ODA group, began to experience a rapid decline in its active membership in the late 1990s. Reasons for the decline are complex and manifold. Several core members had shifted attention away from the group to focus on the ODA campaign. At the same time, personal differences created irreparable divisions between remaining members. To some extent, these tensions may be symptomatic of the powerlessness experienced by disabled people (cf. Scotch 1998), but problems experienced by UDC have to be situated within the context of the government's reforms (Ibbitson 1997). Disabled people were forced to negotiate changes in social assistance and public transit, as well as cuts in programs such as home care (Aronson and Neysmith 2001). Funding cuts and downloading, while not the sole cause of UDC's predicament, did create an increasingly disabling political environment.

**Rescaling municipal governance:** Since 1995, the Progressive Conservative government has orchestrated municipal amalgamation in several large centres in Ontario, including Toronto, Hamilton and London, despite resistance from cities themselves.[2] The government has not been alone in pursuit of this goal (the left-wing NDP planned the Toronto amalgamation), but the Conservatives have used amalgamation to rescale municipal governance in the interests of neoliberalism (Isin 1998; Todd 1998). The creation of 'megacities' has been portrayed as a response to the demands of global capitalism, with cities as entrepreneurs, pursuing capital investment and economic development (Keil 1998).

While the message of neoliberalism has been 'less government', recent municipal change can be interpreted more accurately as a shift in emphasis, with the introduction of new techniques of governance (Isin 1998). For the purposes of this paper, three techniques are notable. The first involves shifting responsibility from governmental departments to nongovernmental organizations that are not democratically accountable to the public (Todd 1998). Examples include subcontracting and privatization of services previously provided by the public sector. Second, Isin (ibid.) argues that subjects of governance have been increasingly reconceived as customers or consumers, rather than citizens. Emphasis on individual responsibility—a leitmotif of neoliberalism—has also meant that individuals who are unable to make choices are blamed for their shortcomings. Third, the rescaling effected by amalgamation has made municipal politics increasingly inaccessible, particularly to already marginalized populations.

To date, critical scholarship on amalgamation in Ontario has focused on Toronto. Our analysis of Hamilton's experience finds similar techniques of governance in evidence. The Hamilton megacity, which came into being in January 2001, brought together six existing cities, reducing elected representatives from 56 (in pre-existing municipalities and the region of Hamilton-Wentworth) to 15. The architect of the new city, an appointed transition board, was explicit about its corporate approach: residents were to be 'customers' of the new city. Arguments presented in favour of amalgamation focused on streamlining government for business development, financial savings through consolidation and privatization.

For disability activists, the effects of megacity restructuring are already being felt. They recognize that downloading has made the municipal a more important scale for political action: 'Since all of these programs have been handed down by the province to the municipality, effective the first of

the year 2001, basically... people like me have to reach the people that are going to be in the next municipal government' (Margaret, Hamilton activist). At the same time, rescaling has made the task facing disability activists (and others) all the more difficult. In 2001, in an effort to streamline city government, the city council considered abolishing many of the citizens' advisory committees that had previously existed under the individual municipalities and replacing them with ten larger umbrella committees. Among the committees recommended for dissolution was the advisory committee on disability (Hughes 2001). Thus, while Bill 125 requires municipalities to have advisory committees on disability, amalgamation, pursued as part of a neoliberal rescaling of governance, threatens the existence of such committees. These developments have provoked consternation on the part of activists, who saw the regional committee as a vital political conduit for disabled people in Hamilton.

Along with the changing nature of local politics, activists are also concerned about the ability and willingness of the new city to fund services for disabled people. Again, accessible transit offers a good example. Downloading has placed considerable strain on accessible transit systems, leading to cutbacks, waiting lists and restrictions on usage. In Hamilton, the city's transition board recommended restructuring and privatization of the DARTS service. The service is already operated at arms'-length from the city, a fact that allows the mayor to evade questions concerning the service's ability to meet transit needs. When asked about a human-rights complaint filed by two riders, the mayor explained that he 'was not familiar with the complaint... [and] said that because DARTS is a subcontractor, the city is not directly responsible for its policies' (Bell 2001, A1). In this and other instances, techniques of governance allow municipal government to deflect demands for public accountability (cf. Isin 1998).

## Summary

By the 1980s and early 1990s, disability-rights organizations in Hamilton had begun to effect change in the structure of the local environment. Working at tiers of both city and regional governance, activists were able to convey what was required for a more accessible urban environment and to press for material change in areas such as physical design and public transit. Moreover, the organizing of groups such as UDC proved important in efforts to establish a provincial movement capable of pushing for comprehensive disability-rights legislation that, in turn, allowed Hamilton-based activists to jump scale.

In a Canadian context, the province has been an important scale for disability activism, since it is here that legislation and funding decisions concerning employment, social services and health services are made and changed. Recognizing this, Toronto-based activists sought to build a provincial disability movement. Their organizing efforts were successful, in part, because of an initial sensitivity to concerns about a Toronto-controlled provincial movement, as well as because of their ability to frame the movement as one in pursuit of a barrier-free province that accommodated the diversity of all disabled people. Over a period of four years, ODA groups across the province worked to publicize the new representational space of a barrier-free province and to hold the government to its promise to enact comprehensive legislation that would bring about the necessary changes to the physical and social environment.

Legislation brought forward by the government constituted an effort to respond to the new representational space articulated by the ODA group. In public statements, the provincial government stated that the legislation would mean significant change for disabled people. In fact, the bill *mandated* little change—none within the private sector. At the same time, the government, as is evident in both the wording of the legislation and statements by the minister, began a partial 'scaling down' of disability-access issues from the province to the municipal scale. This was not so much an attempt to delegitimize a scale for political action (Miller 2000) as it was an attempt to claim support for the idea of a barrier-free province while avoiding, through rescaling, responsibility for material change. These developments took place within broader municipal restructuring. Funding cuts and downloading held negative consequences for disabled people as political actors and for the organizational capacity of groups such as UDC. Amalgamation, driven by neoliberalism, reconstituted the municipal as a scale of governance within which public participation and accountability were more difficult to achieve and sustain.

## Disability Activism in Ireland

> The local level is more responsive to the needs of the individual. The national level is responsive to the needs of the bureaucracy that is set up. (Jim, Kildare activist)

Interviews with disabled activists in Ireland indicate that the scaled nature of the political system produces a very different landscape for disability politics than that found in Ontario. As Breathnach (1992) and Komito (1984, 1992) note, the Irish political landscape reflects the dominance of local clientelism as a mode of political operation. Here, politicians act as gatekeepers to services and thus brokers of power between the public within their constituency and the state. This situation, Breathnach (1992) suggests, is a legacy of British colonialism, when power was centralized in Dublin, and the fact that there has been no major local government reform since the 1898 Local Government Act, with a gradual erosion of local government in the following century. Moreover, the high representative ratio between each TD (member of parliament) and the public (approximately 1:8,000, the lowest in Europe) and a system of proportional representation that supports four or five TDs representing each constituency, have fostered clientelism, as this allows the public greater access to their political representatives and the ability to force constituency TDs to compete against one another. This is also facilitated by Ireland's urban spatial structure, which is skewed towards small towns (only four cities have populations larger than 80,000, and the vast majority of regional and county towns have populations less than 20,000 [OCPS 1996]).

In terms of the politics of scale in Ireland, these contextual factors have three main effects. The first is the development of sophisticated—and quite powerful—networks of local and community groups (residential associations, business alliances, interest groups) that seek to influence developments at the *local* level. The second is the relative weakness of and similarity between national parties (which are all centrist) and the success of independent candidates and family seats (e.g., generations of a family representing a constituency). The third is that it is in politicians' interest to foster clientelism and to block local government reform, as reform would erode their power and affect their ability to get re-elected.

Until recently, disabled people have not sought to exploit clientist politics to any great degree. Historically, disabled people were marginalized and 'hidden' within communities, with disability seen as a family and charity issue. As a consequence, a strong dependency-based model of disability, rather than a rights-based one, has prevailed. This has led, in turn, to the growth of a vast array of charities and voluntary groups, many of which are national in scope, providing services to and representing disabled people. While many of these groups arose out of frustration and local agitation in order to provide a voice and services to a neglected population, it can be argued that they have not been effective champions of disabled people's *rights* (although most undoubtedly have improved services) for a number of reasons.

First, their ethos is almost universally charity-centred rather than rights-based, and most do not hold the same values of the disability movements that emerged in other contexts (indeed many would be the foci of criticism). Second, because of the historical circumstances of welfare provision in Ireland, state services are now almost universally provided through these charity and voluntary bodies, some of which operate nationally with regional offices and others of which are more localized. The vast majority of these bodies then work closely with government, and the state is their main source of funding. As a result, it is not in the financial interests of charities and voluntary bodies to become radical voices for disabled people—nor does it comply with their mission statements. As Jane, a Kildare activist, states, 'I think a lot of them are afraid to rock the boat, as they are afraid because they feel they mightn't get the money'. As a consequence, the unrest and radical voices that led to many of these organizations forming have quickly been subverted by the formation of close business liaisons with the state. Third, because they usually represent specific groups of disabled people as defined by impairment, charity and voluntary groups tend to focus their work solely in relation to these individuals, rather than forming pandisability alliances. As Jim notes:

> I bring it back to the fact that it is a power and control game as much as anything else. You know, it's

the impairment-specific groups fighting each other for the little crumbs from the table.

Finally, it is not in the interests of these groups to work closely with each other, because, as they compete for public funding, partnerships would form the basis for rationalization, which none of the groups want because it would reduce their relative power and lead to redundancies (these are, after all, large multimillion-Euro *businesses*). Again, Jim states:

> The charities will not work together on the philosophical side. There are over five hundred disability organizations receiving state funding; the vast majority have big bureaucratic set-ups as well. There's a fear that—and I know it's a very genuine fear among a lot of them—that they are going to be forced to amalgamate and to get together to reduce costs and put more into direct services.

Taken together, these points mean that charities and voluntary groups do not necessarily hold the same values as the disability-rights movement, nor do they present a united voice. Indeed, our survey revealed a comprehensive picture of how they fail to interconnect. At the same time, their power in creating and sustaining a dependency model of disability has marginalized more radical views. For example, Kitchin and colleagues (1998) argue that many disabled people have been afraid to join the disability movement and to openly challenge the state and these bodies for fear of losing their services, a point echoed in a recent interview with Fiona, a Kildare activist: 'I still think people are apprehensive of joining it [People with Disabilities Ireland Ltd, or PWDI; see below] because they are scared that they might rock the boat and their service provider might object because an awful lot of the service providers are against PWDI for some reason'. In addition, these issues mean that the disabled services landscape is highly fragmented, ad hoc and difficult for disabled people—and, indeed, anyone else—to navigate.

### Scale and the disability movement in Ireland

Despite the obstructive role of charities and voluntary bodies, a disability movement in Ireland has started to emerge over the past decade. At present, this movement is highly fragmented, and has gen-

erally been organized at the local, constituency scale, at which change can be effected through the use of the clientist system. An example of a group working at this scale is the Newbridge Access Group (NAG). NAG was formed in 1997 after a 'listening' meeting conducted by Newbridge Community Development Ltd. to determine local issues relating to youth, old age and disability in the town. A small group with a core of around ten active members, NAG has as its objective simply to make Newbridge (population 13,363 [OCPS 1996]) more accessible for disabled people. It has been relatively effective in this, we would argue, because of its strategic ability to engage in local clientelism, as explained by Jane and Jim:

> Things work at the local level here. It's why I'm involved, why I'm sticking with the access group is because if you take that organic approach it will have a ripple effect, you know. Already I think that has proved to be [unclear]…and I think access to our local politicians would be an argument for that. I know a lot of people compare our access to politicians here with that in England, and they can't get over how readily our politicians will come to meetings and things like that, you know.…Town commissioners will follow-up on stories in the newspaper [gives example]. That's what we have wanted the politicians to do—just take up the baton and run with it—because we can't, as volunteers, be fulltime nagging away and trying to implement changes, you know. (Jane)

> It comes down to the fact that people are prepared to operate on a local level because again there is a knowledge of the individuals, a knowledge of the impact; it's not as bureaucratic as the national legislation or national activities. At that level, rather than making things simple, it is made as obstructive as possible and it's made as bureaucratic as possible, so that if a paper trail is right it does not matter a damn. Whereas at a local level the paper trail doesn't matter a damn, it's what an actual individual needs. (Jim)

NAG has cultivated key alliances with ASK (Action South Kildare), Newbridge Community Development Ltd., Tidy Towns, the Rotary Club, local businesses (e.g., organizing sign-language training for business staff), local press and the nearest university. Moreover, NAG has used

these alliances to elect members to key town and county policy groups and to find funding for its work. Initiatives include working with town and county planners, lobbying developers, organizing access awards, feeding stories to local press, undertaking an access audit and presenting the findings at local events. NAG has also sought to use the clientist system, targeting specific local politicians to affect change, especially in relation to the built environment. While individual members have links to national organizations such as PWDI (see below) and national charities, NAG's work is almost exclusively aimed at Newbridge and its environs.

Given the importance of the local scale in Irish politics, grassroots groups such as NAG have been both unable and unwilling to jump scale. It is significant, then, that in 1995, the final report of the Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities—a body formed at the initiative of a government advisor, rather than as a result of pressure from the disability movement—recommended the establishment of a national network of disabled people. This network, entitled the 'Irish Council of People with Disabilities' (ICPD; now 'People with Disabilities Ireland Ltd', or PWDI), was approved and funding allocated to it by government in 1998. The stated aim of this network was to continue the work of the commission in highlighting disability issues and to foster dialogue among people with different disabilities. In total, 30 networks were formed, one for each of the 26 counties, with four for Dublin and two for Cork, and four development workers employed, plus other staff. Initially very active and quite radical in its aims and outlook, this national network soon floundered—including an acrimonious division within the organization and bad press—and many local networks became largely inactive. A small number still operate relatively effectively (e.g., Kildare, Kerry, Wexford, Wicklow, Cork), but they tend to work independently of each other, focusing attention on local issues.

Acknowledging the failure of the initial networks, PWDI has recently organized a series of training workshops concerned with organizing and maintaining successful networks, and is currently compiling a new strategy document. However, the concept of an organization run by and for disabled people has, to a degree, been abandoned. Most of PWDI's staff members are nondisabled, and

the chief executive seemingly has no background in disability politics, being a former policeman (and he certainly is not radical). Moreover, the group's newly acquired charitable status means it has had to remove the aim of political lobbying from its constitution, severely undermining its credibility among disabled activists. As Fiona notes:

> At the AGM [Annual General Meeting], they took lobbying out of their constitution, which leaves them with not an awful lot to do, I don't think anyway....It's something to do with charitable status. You can't have charitable status and be a lobby group apparently. That's meant to be their purpose.

Some activists argue that a reliance on government funding has meant that whatever radical impulses informed the commission's report, PWDI has been depoliticized at the national level and its radical impulses limited to the local networks. While the organization had input on recent national legislation, the legislation is regarded as weak and largely cosmetic. In Foucault's terms, PWDI has entered into a phase of self-disciplining, its political potential subverted by its partnership with the state (Foucault 1980). One interviewee stated: '[I]t's like the employers paying for unions'. This has left many activists cynical: as Jane states,

> We often wonder whether the people there are there to just run it down—just run it right into the ground—and then they could say, 'We told you so, we gave you the opportunity and you didn't take it'. That's being really cynical.

Jim notes that this is not the story PWDI would tell: 'They will tell you that they are so busy and there is so much good going on out there'. Indeed, Roisin, a PWDI worker, offers a different account during an interview:

> There is a lot of local activity. Some networks are extremely effective and have got enormous amounts done in their local areas through their local councils. Other networks wouldn't be as effective. But at national office we have seen huge change through things that we have lobbied for on legislation and different things....It has definitely moved things along, you know....It isn't always as fast as we'd like, but there is definite movement there.

PWDI has been complemented by the National Disability Authority (NDA), a state agency set up in 1998 to advise the Minister for Disability (another body recommended by the commission report). The NDA is made up of representatives from charities and service providers as well as disabled people themselves, all of whom are political appointees. As yet, the group seems politically toothless. That said, it is experimenting with advocacy and participatory research and is progressively minded. Like PWDI, the NDA seems committed to the emancipation of disabled people, but over a long time frame and from a largely nonradical position.

### Future scales for action?

The focus on local clientelism and the failure to create a radical, grassroots and *independent* national disability movement has profound implications for disabled people in Ireland. Primarily, it means that disabled people remain highly disenfranchised in Irish society (e.g., high rates of unemployment, very limited physical and social access), that disability politics has been for the most part limited to the local arena, that disabled people have few rights protected by legislative measures and that there have been slow and geographically uneven changes in the conditions of disabled people's lives. Where legislation exists, it is weak and cosmetic, full of loopholes and unenforced. The 1998 Irish Education Act, for example, states that disabled children and their parents have the right to seek an education in their local community, and that schools should be resourced to accommodate local disabled children, yet there are few signs that the legislation has been or will be enforced (Kitchin and Mulcahy 1999). Indeed, there are still ongoing court cases between the state and parents over some disabled children's right to an education with reference to the Irish constitution. Similarly, we know of no cases of building developers being actively pursued by the state for failure to comply with Part M of the Building Regulations Act (1991, 1997). The Irish government recently acknowledged the failure of the legislation, condemning those who have used the 'reasonable provision' clause to make minimum access provisions (Department of the Environment and Local Government 1999; Kitchin and Law 2001).

Similarly, the Equal Status Act (2000) is meant to provide protection against discrimination for disabled people. However, the act individualizes discrimination and places the burden of proof on the disabled person. For example, a disabled person asked to leave a bar because they are deemed to be a fire/safety hazard has to prove they were not such a hazard, rather than the bar owner having to prove they were. An Equality Authority—an agency set up by the government to pursue cases under the Equal Status Act—will only take 'test cases', and only if it thinks it will win. Once a precedent is set, people are expected to bring their own cases using their own resources, rather than relying on the state to enforce change. Similarly, the new proposed Disability Bill (2001) is full of loopholes, has an excessively long timetable for implementation and offers few mechanisms for enforcement. It sets out what disabled people are entitled to in theory (though the word 'right' is never used), but with weak procedures to ensure delivery (the Minister of Disability has the power to decide individual cases).

Disability activists feel that these pieces of legislation and agencies of the state will not change their local environment: legislation works only if it has 'real' implications and it is *enforced*. These perceptions further reinforce activists' belief that the only way to change their environment is at the local scale through clientelism.

At the same time, this is not to say that the Irish system is static and beyond change. Two new scales of political activism offer potential. First, there is the possibility for the development of a broader grassroots movement forming from the bottom up rather than being instilled top-down. Preliminary evidence that such a development is possible can be found in County Kildare. Such has been success of NAG in engendering change that two other access groups have formed in two nearby towns, Monasterevin and Naas. Both groups have used NAG as a role model, and there has been some limited interaction between the groups, with NAG providing support and guidance along with the Kildare Community Network. There have also been attempts to form access groups in Athy and Clane. These developments open up possibilities for a new scale of political action at the county level (south Kildare), and may represent the first step in a jump in scale, if groups can work together in a concerted and

coordinated way. As Pat, a local activist, states, 'We are trying to stretch it out to a wider area'. The links forged between NAG and other groups may also mean that the region (county) emerges as an important scale for organizing (cf. Pastor *et al.* 2000).

However, scaling up is dependent upon access to resources and an ability to sustain a collective identity. Activists are cognizant of the importance of key individuals who are willing and able to invest time and energy over a long period. Such people have also been essential to the effectiveness of local groups, and this raises questions about the ability to sustain activities at both scales, particularly given the experiences documented in the previous case study. Activists also argue that 'people are slow to come along' and expect organizations to go to them. As Jane notes,

> What I can't understand when I meet people with disabilities is that they are so complacent. They think somebody else should be doing this. They don't realize that there is a row still on their hands....Or they have too low expectations and they are too slow at getting involved in the disability movement....Maybe it's because of the attitudes to disability in this country, I don't know.

Possibilities for political action also exist at the European scale. Many disabled people in Ireland expect stronger legislation to come, not from pressure within the state on the part of the disability movement, but rather from policy formulation at the European Union (EU) level to which Ireland will have to comply as a member state. In fact, existing legislation, such as the Irish Education Act and the Employment Equality Act, has its roots in EU mandates concerning educational mainstreaming and employment directives. As one activist explains:

> What is going to happen in Ireland, Rob, is very simply, they are going to have to follow the European Union directives....If you look at all of the equality legislation it is all permeating from EU directives that were issued in the first place....You are looking at two different scales in Ireland. You are looking at the local level which is extremely active, extremely vociferous, and you are looking at a very limited number of people acting at the broader macrolevel of Europe rather than the national level....The sandwich between the European and the local level is

> going to have to bring the national level forward. (Jim)

European directives on disability are positively framed and demand enforcement. To date, however, the Irish government has been slow to respond, although it is hoped that a system of penalties will force the state to comply. For some, this has meant the abandoning of the national scale—in the belief that change, if and when it does come, will come from the EU—and a focusing of effort instead on changing the here-and-now at the local scale.

## Summary

In an Irish context, much of the social change wrought by disability movements to date has occurred at the local level. As the experience of activists in Newbridge illustrates, groups have been able to organize effectively and articulate demands for greater access in the local environment. The clientist system, with its emphasis on local patronage, is well suited to demands for small-scale change in specific contexts. At the same time however, the taken-for-granted nature of the clientist system has made it difficult for disability organizations to work toward broader structural change at the national level. Concomitantly, the historical proliferation of national disability charities and services as part of the shadow state and the recent emergence of a state-sponsored network of disability groups has left little 'political space' (cf. Magnusson 1996) for grassroots organizing at the national scale by disabled persons. As the interviews conducted for this study demonstrate, many activists are cynical about the potential for effective national disability-rights legislation. Their cynicism appears well founded, given the shortcomings of current legislation.

Nevertheless, political opportunities appear to be emerging at two different but potentially related scales. The development of disability legislation as part of the ongoing evolution of the EU suggests that this supranational scale may hold important implications for Irish context. At the same time, if groups like the NAG can organize in county-based coalitions, this may foster the creation of a novel scale for political action. Regional coalitions, established through grass-

roots pressure from the local level, may be able to draw political power collectively from several local clientist systems. These coalitions will be faced with challenges, such as limited resources and the need to sustain a broader collective identity, but they may be able to articulate a broader conception of accessible environment and to press for regional change, such as accessible transit.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we have used two case studies to examine the political construction of scale in relation to the disability movement. In particular, we have highlighted how the scaled political structures operating in different settings shape the effectiveness of political mobilization around disability issues, and how these shift over time to both facilitate and constrain opportunities for reform and jumping scale. Indeed, it is clear from our analysis that an historicized analysis is important for tracing out the interplay between proponents of stasis and reform, revealing the ways in which actors such as governments and state agencies 'organize themselves and their messages through the ways in which they divide and order space' (Agnew 1997, 118) and illuminating how such ordering seeks to channel and delineate social relations whilst limiting political opposition and challenge.

In relation to our case studies, such an analysis reveals how, in Ontario, organizing around the comprehensive Ontarians with Disabilities Act (ODA) at the provincial scale was made possible in part by the existence of groups, such as UDC in Hamilton, that had already organized at the municipal scale to effect change. ODA organizing opened up the possibility of a new scale of political action, giving impetus to the mobilization of a provincewide movement. At the same time, the provincial government's program of cutbacks and downloading, coupled with a neoliberal rescaling of governance, shifted responsibility for access provisions to an increasingly inaccessible municipal government. In addition, the jumping of scale stretched resources within local groups and may have contributed to a weakening of the disability movement at the municipal scale at precisely the time at which this scale was being transformed. Here, it is apparent that the material constraints facing disabled individuals and groups limit their efforts to build political momentum concurrently at different scales. As a consequence, scaling up did pose challenges to collective political identity by undermining and overstretching local groups and the individuals within them.

Similarly, in Ireland, a system of local clientelism, coupled with the political ineffectiveness of the voluntary and charity groups who have traditionally represented disabled people, has meant that the disability movement has been unsuccessful at jumping scales to the national arena and has been reluctant to attempt that jump. When an attempt to create such a national movement was made, it quickly failed, because its initial impetus was stifled and its power co-opted by the state. Interestingly, for some, disability activism at the national scale has become redundant due the influence of a larger and more powerful political scale, that of the European Union. For these activists, there is little pressure or reason to scale up, as it is perceived that a different set of actors will enact change. However, there is also evidence of political activity being coordinated at a regional scale, as local groups begin to forge ties with one another, and this may create opportunities for new forms of political mobilization beyond the local level. Here again, successful mobilization may depend on an ability to sustain local activity while concomitantly developing the capacity for collective action at the county level.

Taken together, the case studies illustrate how disability politics is scaled and how such scaling is continually being constructed, negotiated and transformed through the interplay of 'context, actors, strategies, maneuvers, stakes, ideologies and time' (Delaney and Leitner 1997, 95)—how scale is caught in a tension of fixing and unsettling, of stability and instability. Disabled people in Canada and Ireland are engaged in struggles to reconcile spaces of dependence with spaces of engagement, and in doing so they seek to organize at existing scales (notably the local), work to 'scale up' to effect broader change and, in some instances, create new scales for political action. At the same time, the state and other actors use their power to constrain or deflect the collective mobilizations of disability groups in an effort to maintain existing scaled relations.

Finally, the case studies point to the importance of work on the spatiality of social movements, particularly as it relates to the politics of scale. Recent

work has emphasized the importance of 'spatial consciousness' in social-movement organizing (Soja 2000). In both Ontario and Ireland, disability activists are cognizant of the opportunities and constraints of organizing at different scales, suggesting that critical scholarship on scale politics might be used both to draw lessons from and to inform ongoing organizing in these and other contexts.

## Acknowledgements

## Notes

1  From 1974 to 2001, the Hamilton region had a two-tiered system of municipal governance, with Hamilton and adjacent municipalities coordinating some services through the region of Hamilton-Wentworth.
2  Forced amalgamation is possible under Section 92(8) of the Constitution Act, which grants provinces authority over municipalities.

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