Speech, Women’s Walk, Manchester 2018

Jackie Driver, Chief Executive, Breakthrough UK and

Jenny Gradwell, Daughter of the late Lorraine Gradwell

(Image showing the Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People and Breakthrough UK joint project - the *Trust* Lorraine Foundation – to increase disabled people’s representation in elected office)

Why?

Unequal representation in public life reflects and accentuates inequality. The narrower the range of backgrounds in public life, the narrower the range of interests and experiences that are brought to bear in decision making. This results in exclusive and unresponsive political systems.

The suffragettes who laid their lives on the line to fight for greater representation – through the right to vote – and ultimately – the right for women’s interests to be brought to the fore – knew this.

It’s bad enough being treated as a second-class citizen, an experience that is all too common. But if you’re denied the vote - in effect you have your citizenship stripped from you.

In the 2017 elections, 99 years on from universal suffrage in this country, some disabled voters went to the polling station and were sent away or were not able to get in.

This exclusion is simply unacceptable in a modern democracy.

All voters have a right to vote independently, in secret, in the way that they choose.

And in elected office - the laws that are passed in the Commons in particular, but also at local levels, affect the lives of all of us; in this respect, elected office holds a unique responsibility to take steps towards being representative of the population.

And yet, evidence indicates an educational and demographic divide in political representation, particularly amongst young people, disabled people, women, transgender people and people from BME communities.

What?

Lorraine Gradwell MBE was a phenomenal presence.

She was one of the few women who made our civil rights movement so effective in the late 80s and 90s, especially in Manchester, which, we can all agree, became the bastion of the disability rights movement.

Lorraine’s abiding passion for grass roots organisations taking control was a mainstay throughout her life. After a life aiming for and reaching the pinnacle of Paralympic heights (among many other achievements), Lorraine became a founding member of the Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People and Breakthrough UK - her drive and involvement in both organisations continued right up to her untimely death last year.

As a force of nature and a champion of and for disabled people (not to mention a single Mum of two young children), Lorraine never hesitated to speak truth to power, both locally or nationally.

In 2008, The House of Commons Speaker’s Conference on Parliamentary Representation was convened to consider the disparity between the representation of women, ethnic minorities, and disabled people in the House of Commons and their representation in the UK population at large.

Lorraine was an active and vocal member of that board. It delivered its conclusions and recommendations, which the Speaker said went “to the heart of the House's future.”

Yet, ten years on from that Speaker’s Conference only a handful of its recommendations have been implemented.

Last year, the election results saw some increases in diversity, but there still exists today significant and unacceptable political underrepresentation:

* Disabled people at less than 1% are hugely underrepresented
* Representation of trans people is unrecorded
* BAME representation is less than half of what it should be
* Women still only represent a third of MPs
* LGB representation is doing ok
* Private school-educated MPs are vastly over represented

And locally, we believe the position is much the same. Comparative figures are not readily available, and so we call on councils to collect and publish the make-up of our leadership.

But the problem doesn't just exist in political representation.

This time last year, a Manchester conference celebrating the best and brightest business leaders in the north of England [was criticised after all 15 key note speakers were male](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/feb/14/northern-powerhouse-blasted-under-representing-women-manchester), and amongst those men, diversity was significantly lacking.

The ‘northern powerhouse’ is still being shaped — it seeks to rebalance the UK economy by ensuring the north works together and speaks with one voice — which cannot be done if, locally, diverse people are excluded from high-level conversations.

Today, in Lorraine’s name, the Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People and Breakthrough UK together launch the Trust Lorraine Foundation.

This Foundation has a clear purpose – to develop the strong representation and fair leadership vital to a democracy by removing the barriers to elected office that disable people.

How?

This Foundation, targeted at disabled people - aims to remove barriers and create the conditions which will enable increased diverse political representation in and around Manchester.

The Foundation will work with disabled people who want to get into elected office and the responsible agencies to drive the 7 point plan to:

* Create the right conditions for diverse representation
* Secure all party commitment to true diversity
* Promote opportunities for under-represented people
* Re-open the Access to Elected Office Fund
* Monitor progress towards the diversity of those in elected office
* Take proactive steps to ensure that polling stations are accessible to disabled people
* Ensure that disabled voters are given an equal level of service to others

Today, 100 years on from the start of women’s right to vote, we are calling upon you to pledge your support to the Trust Lorraine Foundation – entrusting Manchester disabled people’s led organisations, in the name of Lorraine Gradwell, one of the city’s finest civil rights campaigners – to deliver the same equity for disabled people of the region. Trust Lorraine; continuing to fight for equality - through us. So come and join us, work with us and help us to deliver equality.

If you want to find out more about the different ways you can be involved and make an impact, go to our websites [www.gmcdp.com](http://www.gmcdp.com) and [www.breakthrough-uk.co.uk](http://www.breakthrough-uk.co.uk)

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