# Episode 4 The right to participate in political and public life as wells as to vote independently

**Speaker1:** [00:00:00] This podcast is supported by the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Program of the European Union.

**Neven Milivojevic:** [00:00:16] Welcome to the Rights Reporting podcast. This is a show aiming to improve the rights of blind and partially sighted citizens in Europe. And my name is Neven Milivojevic, and I will be the host of today. Today, we will focus on the important right of being able to participate in political and public life as well as to vote independently. Well, this right is clearly stipulated in Article 29 in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. So, it's clearly there. But unfortunately, while the political visions do not always turn out into reality, and we can see that implementation of these rights often are not in place. So today we have invited two guests, two experts, one from Denmark and one from United Kingdom. And we will also learn more about different barriers and challenges, but also speak about what possibilities and what can be done to find solutions. But before I introduce our guests, let's listen to Tracy Dearing, a blind politician from Hull in UK, and she will tell us about her experiences when she was elected councillor last year.

**Tracy Dearing:** [00:01:41] Thank you for the opportunity to be able to speak to you about my experiences of being in politics as a blind woman. I was really, really keen to stand up for my own local community and stand up for disabled people actually in politics, because I think it's really important that we have diversity in politics and a range of different voices having a say about policies and practice and the decisions that affect us. My experience, first of all, in terms of campaigning and being part of a political party, was a really positive one, actually. I had lots of encouragement and I received a lot of support from volunteers in the party. And the party did give me some funding to bring in some additional support as I campaigned. However, I did find when I became elected as a councillor, a local politician, that the authority where I was going to be a councillor was very ill prepared to have a blind councillor in their midst. And it did take me quite a while to get the support I needed in place. So, I think, first of all, the authority was very, very unprepared for even having a conversation with me about what I would need to be a local councillor.

**Tracy Dearing:** [00:03:36] I think one of the big barriers I've faced was having access to information and being able to read the same information as other councillors. So, I was at a real disadvantage because the authority, as I said, were really ill prepared, just weren't able to provide information in different formats. So, it took me a while to work a way round that. Also, I found it because being a councillor there's a lot of formal meetings you need to chair and you need to be part of. And I was lucky enough to be chosen and elected as a chair of what we call a committee, a scrutiny committee that looks at scrutinising decisions. But the formal arrangement of the meeting made it really difficult for me as a blind person to chair it. So, for example, everybody puts their hands up when they want to speak, which made it initially very difficult for me to chair that meeting. I had to introduce lots of new systems and ways to enable me to chair that committee. And then a big part of my role is being out in the community. So just getting around safely, meeting people, giving information, travelling the world, knocking on people's door was really difficult.

**Tracy Dearing:** [00:05:21] And as I said, the authority was very unprepared in terms of how we were going to work together to resolve that. So, for the first instance, I couldn't go out into the community safely to actually do my job. I. I found it really difficult to travel across the world. It took quite a bit of negotiation to get that support in place. I'm eight months in now and I have negotiated with the government and with the local authority to have a support worker. And the support worker helps me to negotiate the environment so helps me travel, get to where I need to go to meet people. She helps me in meetings, and I have been able to get reading material in a format that I can read, but it has taken and still the reading of information is still a challenge. But we're quite a way on now and I'm in a better position. But these are the things I think the blind politicians will face on a on a daily basis. Thank you.

**Neven Milivojevic:** [00:06:44] So I would like to welcome our two guests for today's podcast. We have with us from Denmark Diana Stentoft, who is the general secretary of the World Blind Union. Welcome, Diana.

**Diana Stentoft:** [00:06:57] Hello. And very good to be here.

**Neven Milivojevic:** [00:07:00] And we also have with us from United Kingdom James Adams, who is the director of the Royal National Institute of Blind People in Scotland. Welcome, James.

**James Adams:** [00:07:12] Hi. It's great to be here.

**Neven Milivojevic:** [00:07:14] Wonderful to have you both here. So, James, what are your thoughts about Tracy during a story we just heard? And do you recognize these challenges? And what do you think can be done in this subject?

**James Adams:** [00:07:31] There was three aspects to this story that struck me in particular and within her story there’re actually potential solutions that can be brought in to help people like Tracy who want to go into public life and engage in the political process. The first thing that struck me was that she had got some help and support from her local political party branch, and that was a financial support to be able to have somebody to help her do the campaigning you have to do to get elected. I think that's something that's often not thought about. If somebody is blind or partially sighted, how do they go out and tap on doors, talk to voters, deliver leaflets, the sort of things that in the UK are what is done by political parties. So that was interesting to me. The second thing I found particularly interesting was that the local authority, the council where she was elected to, it didn't seem prepared to be able to deal with somebody who was blind actually getting elected. And you would think that that's a strange thing, given that they must have known she was a candidate, and they must have known that she had sight loss. And yet when she arrived. And the third thing that struck me was that she found it difficult to get the information she acquired and a lot of information in government, a lot of papers, a large volume of all sorts of things to read.

**James Adams:** [00:09:06] And it's critical and essential that it’s made available and accessible to our elected representatives. I also found her experience of chairing a meeting. I believe she was appointed to a scrutiny committee, a very important function of government and of our council. And yet she was unable to initially because of the lack of support that was there to initially get Tracy into fulfilling that role. I think, then. what story did demonstrate was that solutions are there. I guess requires about planning and foresight and engagement. So, our local political party they help to write not all political parties or labels do that, but there's something for them to think about in terms of how they would support somebody with disabilities and the state laws. There's no reason why a local authority, a council or a parliament can't be prepared for somebody with a disability, or you have sight loss becoming elected because it's going to happen and need to understand that and prepare for it. And the third thing is, in that preparation, they also should, with a bit of planning, be able to make information accessible, and they should be able to get a mechanism whereby somebody can effectively discharge the chairing of a meeting, the running of a meeting, participation in a meeting. And so, I think those are the three areas I find very interesting. But within those there were the seeds of how these things can be resolved for future.

**Neven Milivojevic:** [00:10:39] But would you say James that this is exceptional within this case? Or would you say this is something which is similar in most places in UK?

**James Adams:** [00:10:48] I would fear that that is the norm. I would heavily suspect and in fact of course I do have other sort of friends and colleagues who have state laws who are elected into other bits of government in the UK. And that is something that is the case. It is the norm. It takes them to have sharp elbows, to be able to make the strong points to get the support they need. But they shouldn't have to do that. That should be thought about in advance by the authorities.

**Neven Milivojevic:** [00:11:17] Well, Diana, what are your reflections on the possibilities to participate in public life for persons with disabilities?

**Diana Stentoft:** [00:11:25] Well, I think my reflections are actually quite well reflected in the case of Tracy. And if we look globally, it's estimated that 15% approximately of the world population do have some form of disability one way or the other. But looking into parliaments, into local authorities, into municipalities around the globe, actually what we can see is that very few people with disabilities are elected. So on that basis alone, it's very hard to see that people with disabilities are actually well included into public life. And I do think that Tracy hits the mark when she kind of talks about the difficulties in getting provisions, as James also mentioning. But also another thing is when talking more specifically about blind and partially sighted persons, one thing that is quite clear is that from making the decision or from considering your own kind of interest in political life and desire to engage with the political life and the public life of your town or your country, and to actually obtaining the right kind of information to get involved with a party, to sort out the information that is needed and required to make to be an active player and to get heavily involved. Actually, accessibility to this kind of information is very lacking in many places. So I think for, for visually impaired persons, even getting started if you like is actually quite difficult and again quite well reflected in the number of visually impaired persons who are then eventually elected for one office or another.

**Neven Milivojevic:** [00:13:32] So you would say about the situation, for instance, in Denmark where you're from, it's very similar to the one in the UK.

**Diana Stentoft:** [00:13:38] Yes, it's very similar. And incidentally, actually a few years back, we had a lady, a young lady in an electric wheelchair who was brought into parliament because she had to be a substitute for someone going on leave. And they had to rebuild the speaker's chair, the area where you would perform your speeches to enable her to even go there. And I think that just says everything about the difficulties that we have in providing accessibility and giving the right provisions to enable people to even take up that office. And could I just also add that even the struggle to get into office, one thing is the election campaigns and all the things that are related to the content of politics. But if you have to fight the battle to get the right provisions on the side of the struggle you already have, I think it makes it almost inhuman to try and run for office in the various elections.

**Neven Milivojevic:** [00:14:56] Yes, it's a very serious matter of race. And, I mean, we have been talking now about mainly a responsibility of society and the authorities. But well, let's look at for instance, about the political parties. I guess they should have maybe a more important role in encouraging and enabling candidates with a disability. So, for instance, James, do you have any advice here? What could political parties do not in their decisions as decision makers, but more as parties?

**James Adams:** [00:15:31] Yeah, I think this is a very, very important thing to explore. Political parties want to be representative of society. So, in order for that to be the case, they need to reflect their understanding and how they conduct their internal administration and their processes so that it is easily accessible for people with disabilities. And it's also important for political parties to build up role models in society so that it does attract other people to go into politics who might otherwise think it's not something which would be accessible or possible for them. I think one of part of Tracy's experience was a positive one in that her local political party helped support her to be able to go and do that sort of campaigning and so forth on the ground. I think all political parties can learn from that. I have a friend who's a blind councillor in where I live in Glasgow and he does find it difficult to be able to go out and about on his own or with you or to meet others to go campaigning because he can't tell what street he's in sometimes or which door he’s going to knock. And these are very basic things. However, they're utterly essential for that, the conduct of the political process. And you do know, we shouldn't exclude people because the political parties don't anticipate that could be an issue. So, for them to find ways to be able to have some dedicated resource to be able to make that happen more easily if people with disabilities, I think, is really very important.

**James Adams:** [00:17:10] And another aspect which some political parties do this to a greater or lesser extent, but it's to build within those parties and perhaps even cross party networks of people with disabilities to be able to support each other, exchange information, work out. The technical side of how to go about campaigning and being involved, I think is very important. I also think that political parties need to lead from the front. They have to make their own communications accessible. There's still a great culture in the UK of the political leaflet going through somebody's door and obviously being a professional in the visual impairment sector I'm often appalled at the lack of basic accessibility features. Well, in these leaflets. Even when it comes to social media, when political parties are posting pictures and photographs, we all know we can text it and make sure that it's described. These small, basic things should be built into the DNA of the political parties’ own operations, and because that in itself makes a statement and is more inclusive and engaging. The final thing I would say on it, it would be a good start for all the political parties to be determined to make the voting process in and of itself fully accessible. And that's a big sort of campaign that's ongoing in the UK at the moment.

**Neven Milivojevic:** [00:18:38] Well, there seems to be many things actually that can be done. We can come back to this issue about voting. But Diana, I have a question to you. As I know you are an expert on international frameworks and the CRPD, which is the United Nations convention. I mean, is this a tool which can be used in this kind of reality we have now? And how can governments better use this CRPD to make a difference? Could you tell us a little about your thoughts on this?

**Diana Stentoft:** [00:19:17] Absolutely. First of all, I think the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is an immensely important tool because in Article 29, as you also mentioned at the introduction, Neven, it is actually stated how persons with disabilities should have the right to vote, to vote in secret, to have access to the voting materials, and also how as a person with disabilities we should have access to the public life and even as important and we should have the possibility to organize ourselves. So that article actually sets out what would be very basic human rights. Also, when you have a disability and I think in that sense, we can use the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities as a way of making our human rights clear, because it's a very clear framework. It's very easily accessed, it's very readable. So, it's a way of saying it's not just an individual desire to vote or to be an active part. It's actually a human right. And I think the transformation into thinking that being part of political life is a human right is very important because that makes us first and foremost humans and then incidentally, with a disability. So having said that, we also have quite a number of examples where the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has actually been brought into use.

**Diana Stentoft:** [00:21:21] And when a nation state ratifies the convention, what they subscribe to is to be monitored by the committee in the UN system, making sure that if you have ratified the convention, you are actually going to fulfil it and to acknowledge that it is there and bring it into your national laws and customs. So basically what happened in Denmark over more or less a ten year period, just to give one example, is that when it was the Danish state that had to go into the monitoring process and it was acknowledged that Denmark had problems with Article 29 because no provisions were made at election stations to ensure that people with visual impairment could actually access the materials. And also, you had to bring in not just one, but two of the electoral people overseeing the election and not of your choice, but to people that were kind of decided for you. So, your ballot would not be secret in any way. And organisations of persons with disabilities in Denmark came together and wrote a shadow report to the committee. Showing how the Danish state is not adhering to Article 29.

**Diana Stentoft:** [00:23:07] And eventually the committee came out with recommendations that these things to be changed in the Danish laws and the frameworks guiding the Danish electoral processes. So basically, since a few years back, we have now a system where, first of all, assistive technologies are provided. So, if you have low vision, you can go, you can still use magnification, you can get better light and so on. If you are completely blind or if you need assistance, you now have the choice to bring your own assistant of your choice and without any of the persons from the electoral station being present. So this came about because organizations pushed and actually fully engaged with the monitoring of the Convention of Rights of Persons with Disabilities. And to be honest, we have fought for this within Denmark for many years, but only after the Danish state ratified the convention and we started using these mechanisms within the convention did anything happen in the actual laws guiding the electoral process. So, I think these things does matter and I think it's really important that we use these tools that we have available, even though it's very complex process and a very long process. This took almost ten years.

**Neven Milivojevic:** [00:24:56] Well, but it's a good example. But may I ask you, Diana, so does this mean that organizations of persons with disabilities in Denmark, they consider it equal to be able to vote independently, to be able to bring assistance of choice?

**Diana Stentoft:** [00:25:19] No, no. And actually, one other recommendation from the UN Committee on the convention actually is that in Denmark we should introduce more technology into our electoral system in order for people to be able to cast votes completely secretly. So that you can go on your own and you don't need to bring anyone. We haven't made it to that yet. So, I would say this is the first step of the way. And I'm sure we'll write another section in the next shadow report asking that this be pushed forward and that we get to vote in secret.

**Neven Milivojevic:** [00:26:10] Most interesting. Well, I know, James, that you have been working with this same issue in the U.K. to try to find solutions about how to be able to cast the vote secretly. So could you tell us about the progress on that?

**James Adams:** [00:26:27] Yes, it's a little complicated. I shall try my best not to talk about the governance arrangements in the U.K., because there's different levels of devolution and administration and different laws. And but in general terms, what has happened in the U.K. is that there's been something called a tactile voting device, which has been allowed to be used, underpinned by legislation in polling stations in the U.K. And that is our sort of plastic device that go over the ballot paper. And you would know under which flap the party or candidate you wish to vote for would be. So, you might know your party or your candidate would be under flat number three, which would help you be able to find where to put your mark on the ballot paper. Now, what's happened is that this was challenged by a blind person who said that in and of itself does not guarantee the confidentiality and the secrecy of their vote, because they might still need some support. So, this went through the court system and the top court in the UK. The Supreme Court agreed with that individual and said to the UK government, it's unlawful. We appreciate this is difficult, but please go and find another way of resolving this using technology or however.

**James Adams:** [00:28:00] So that's positive. So, there was a process similar to Denmark, start looking at how to use technology, different ways of doing things. What's now happened is that the UK Government is bringing forward another elections bill. Not because of this issue, but they were bringing it forward anyway. And they've decided to change the bit of legislation which guaranteed the tactile voting device and say that's no longer required. At all. So that is causing RNIB and blind people in the UK an issue because whilst that wasn't the perfect aid to help, it was something. And no, they're saying it's not necessary and they want to water down or rethink. They want to water down the whole provision of protection. Whilst the UK Government would say they're looking to develop other ways of doing this and they'll leave it to local areas, the local elections officers to decide what's best for their local area. What we think that will mean is it will reduce the guaranteed provision of being able to utilise support to be able to vote in confidence and secret. So, there's a campaign around that and we are strongly campaigning and lobbying the UK Government on this to change the mind and strengthen the provisions, not weaken them.

**Neven Milivojevic:** [00:29:32] I must say that I can see that you worked very hard with this issue in both Denmark and the UK. But I do have a final question to both of you. What do you think would be the consequences of so many persons with disability and in this case, blind and partially sighted, who cannot participate fully in the public life, political life or vote independently. Could you say a few words about that? Let's start with you, Diana.

**Diana Stentoft:** [00:30:05] Yes. Well, first of all, I think we all and in most parts of the world we live in, in democracies, one way or the other, where voting is seen as something natural, something we do occasionally, and a way to influence society. And I think for people not having access to voting is demoralizing. It kind of spells out how you are different, how you are not contributing or participating. And I think that's a very negative thing for the individual. And at the same time, I'm sometimes wondering what would happen if actually everyone with a disability came out in force and cast their vote, did have access? Would that change anything in politics? What would happen if we got to that point? Because we can see in many countries around the world, the number of persons with disabilities is much higher than what we see in Europe. And how would it change the landscape of politics if we actually got everyone on board? So, I think that's an interesting thought to play with sometimes.

**Neven Milivojevic:** [00:31:33] Interesting. So, James, do you have any thoughts about this?

**James Adams:** [00:31:37] Yes. I think another way to look at it is that the way in which we vote in the UK and I know across most of Europe has been said since this of mid to late 19th century as a piece of paper with a pencil and you mark how you want to vote, you put it in a box and it gets counted. Now there's lots of other things you can do electronic counting, postal ballots, telephone voting and what happens in some parts of Europe. But it cannot be the case that that way of voting 150 years later, with all the technology that we have, that it is not possible to identify an easily workable solution. Using technology to be able to give people what is, you know, underpins a democratic way of life. It's a it's a human right to be able to express your opinion in a vote in secret and in confidence. And it's so fundamental and there's so much technology out there. I just think it just needs to be sorted out. And it'd be very interesting to speak to Diana about the works going in Denmark, because it must vote to bring this together to get simple, workable technology solutions to be able to resolve this issue.

**Neven Milivojevic:** [00:32:54] Thank you very much, both of you. It has been very inspiring to listen to you and also to hear about the work you both do. So, thank you also to everybody who has been listening to the Rights Reporting podcast. This show is a part of a European PARVIS project, and this project is led by the European Blind Union, the Swedish Association of the Visually Impaired and Eye Association of the Netherlands. And the project is supported by the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme of the European Union. Thank you for that. And did you get curious about this subject? Would you like to know more? Well, you're most welcome to contact us. You can find different contact details in the show notes. I also would like to say thank you to Emil Cornelisse, who is our sound master, and who makes sure that we all can be heard. So, the next episode of his podcast will be aired in about two months, so I hope you will be able to listen to us then. One way is, for instance, to subscribe in your podcast app so you don't forget. Until then, thank you very much and I wish you a pleasant day.

**Speaker1:** [00:34:22] This podcast was supported by the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Program of the European Union.

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