

## Speech

Harry Roche – Inclusion Europe Board member

4th European Parliament of Persons with Disabilities

December 6th 2017

Good morning.

Members of the European Parliament.

European Commissioners and officials.

Fellow representatives of disability organisations.

It is a great honour to be asked to speak to you today in the European Parliament.

My name is Harry Roche.

I am a Board member of Inclusion Europe, the association of people with intellectual disabilities and their families.

In my full time job I am part of the Chief Executive's team at Mencap in the UK.

I will talk to you today about 4 things:

**Number 1:**

The things that stop people with intellectual disability from voting and from getting involved in political parties and politics.

**Number 2:**

What the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with disabilities says our countries and the EU should do.

**Number 3:**

Examples from my experience that show how we can take part in politics in our own countries, and in Europe.

**Number 4:**

How all of us here today can make a difference.

Whether you are from the European Commission, the European Parliament or from a disabled people's organisation.

## **What stops people from voting**

In 10 countries of the European Union, laws on legal capacity deny people with intellectual disability the right to vote.

In some countries people living in institutions are not allowed to vote.

In some countries, we are denied the right to form associations, to join organisations or to hold office.

Let me give you an example:

A woman in Spain was required to take a test to prove she could vote.

Let me ask you:

What if all people had to do a test to vote?

How many voters would pass?

I am happy to say that the political parties in the Spanish parliament have now promised to change this.

Even where the law does not deny people the right to vote, accessibility is a big problem.

The polling booths and arrangements for casting your vote can be hard to use or to understand.

Information on how to register, how to vote or who to vote for is complicated.

And it is not provided in easy to read and to understand.

Officials at polling stations may not provide the right support to voters with disabilities.

Often, people with intellectual disabilities are not invited to political meetings.

They are not consulted on matters important for them and for their community.

Also, prejudice about intellectual disability makes it difficult for individuals to participate, get experience and to show their skills and abilities.

And this applies to their family members too.

People living in institutions or care services may not be supported to register or cast their votes.

Even getting to the polling station can be difficult.

## **What the CRPD says**

The CRPD Committee looked at how the convention is being followed in the EU.

They expressed deep concern that across the European Union, persons with disabilities, especially those being denied their legal capacity or living in institutions, cannot exercise their right to vote and that elections are not fully accessible.

The CRPD Committee called on the EU to take the measures to enable all persons with disabilities, including those placed under guardianship, to enjoy their right to vote and stand for election, including by providing accessible communication and facilities.

## **What can be done to increase accessibility**

Mencap ran a campaign called 'Hear my voice' during the 2015 UK General Election.

It was an opportunity for people with an intellectual disability and their families to share their stories on the challenges they faced.

We understand many politicians might not know about the challenges people with an intellectual disability and their families face.

We asked the candidates to support the campaign and inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities in politics.

Hear my voice campaign was a great success as it connected people with an intellectual disability and their families to politicians in a way that never happened before.

During last two General Elections, we held husting events for people with an intellectual disability.

Husting is an event which gives you the chance to meet all your candidates from the party they represent to discuss what they will do if elected.

People with an intellectual disability  
asked questions.

Many asked about cuts to benefits, social care  
and jobs.

I also want to give you examples of  
elected politicians with intellectual disabilities

Councillor Sara Pickard has been serving  
as an elected Councillor  
on her local Community Council  
for the past 6 years.

She takes great pride in ensuring  
that the needs of those with disabilities  
in her local community  
are brought to the attention  
of the Community Council.

In 2013, Angela Bachiller became  
Spain's first ever town councillor  
with Down Syndrome.

Angela's decision to get involved in politics  
began with her participation  
in the May 2011 electoral campaign in Valladolid.

In 2015, Gavin Harding MBE  
became the Mayor of Selby in North Yorkshire.

In 2014 he was awarded an MBE  
in the Queen's birthday honour list  
for services to People with Learning Disabilities.

These 3 people are great examples  
of people with intellectual disability  
breaking down the barriers, being elected  
and being involved in making decisions.

**To finish, I would like to give you some examples what you can do**

**What you can do on policy:**

- Set standards for EU elections
- Develop and share expertise in reform of capacity laws
- Collect information on participation of people with disabilities in elections
- Projects to strengthen political participation and know-how

**What you can do as practical steps:**

- Meet with us and our organizations
- Get advice and training on accessibility of materials and meetings
- Create internship opportunities
- Raise awareness about CRPD in political parties

**And as Members of the European Parliament,  
what you can do right now is:**

- Support the oral question on guardianship and legal capacity tabled by MEPs Grapini and Sehnalová.
- It needs to be placed on the Plenary agenda so this important issue gets the necessary attention.

I talked here about the things that prevent people with intellectual disabilities from participating in elections.

These are things like states denying people the right to vote.

Or election materials or events not being accessible for people with intellectual disabilities.

I am confident that this event today means the European Parliament takes these issues seriously and will make sure people with intellectual disabilities can fully exercise their rights.