**General Election 2017 debrief:**

**Why one deaf man didn't vote until his 40s**

EMMA       Let’s have a bit of a debrief. How did the General Election 2017 pan out for disabled people? Were we catered for during the campaigns? Did more of us access the polling stations successfully? And are there more disabled MPs than there were in 2015. This is Inside Ouch, our podcast from the BBC Ouch team where we look at the world from the disabled person’s perspective. I’m Emma Tracey and with me is Dan Gordon, another Ouch team member. Hi Dan.

DAN         Hello.

EMMA       And Dan has been looking at all sorts of things around disability and the election since the snap election was called back a couple of months ago.

DAN         That’s right. I’ve been trying to find out the number of disabled people there are and how many of them were likely to vote, how many of them did vote and so on. I haven’t got answers to many of those things! But we will come onto that.

EMMA       Scope said there are 13 million disabled people in the UK, which sounds like a lot.
DAN  It does. I had a lot of trouble actually convincing non-disabled people that that was the case. But that does count everything, and it’s a very confusing statistic in all honesty because what they count as disabled people, the people that they’re counting might not actually consider themselves to be disabled therefore they might not identify it as disabled, and that therefore has an impact on the stats they’re trying to gather. They might also count themselves and politicians might count them as elderly people rather than disabled people and so on. So, they’ve lumped a lot of things together there.

EMMA  Sure. But I guess it’s anyone who comes under the what was the Disability Discrimination Act, now the Equality Act.

DAN  That’s right, yes.

EMMA  Scope also said that 89% of them were planning to vote.

DAN  They did say that, although so far there are no statistics on the number of people that actually did vote. Interestingly the Electoral Commission they’ve asked people to tell them their experience now, so in a couple of weeks we should have some information on that and perhaps will come back to it.

Even in previous elections you have to go quite a long way back before there’s anything reliable about the number of people that vote. The most recent statistic that kept on being quoted to me was about the number of people with learning difficulties who wanted to vote. It was something like 89% wanted to vote, but in the end 60% were put off from voting because of accessibility issues.
EMMA    Interesting.

DAN     So, it will be interesting to see if that has been repeated this time round.

EMMA    Absolutely. In a little while we’ll be talking to Eleanor Lisney, one of the founders of the hashtag #CripTheVoteUK, which was all about engaging disabled people in the election. But first of all we’ve got Charlie Swinbourne. Are you there Charlie?

CHARLIE Hi there.

EMMA    Hiya. Charlie is the editor of Limping Chicken, a deaf lifestyle and news blog. And Charlie has asserted that this has been the most engaged election for deaf people so far, and for a very interesting reason as well. Tell me all about that.

CHARLIE Well, deaf people have really engaged with this election, and I think it’s been growing over the last four years really. I think the Scottish Independence Referendum was the beginning, and then it was the General Election in 2015 and then there was the EU Referendum last year, so I think this momentum has picked up where deaf people have started groups on Facebook and it really has been where a lot of this has been driven from. There are groups where people are continually discussion in the most recent election various policies, manifestos, the benefits of each political party and going into a lot of detail and having these conversations that really add up to what politics is all about.

And previously deaf people, before social media became so big, they had been very excluded from that kind of political discussion, and that is what is really changing. And I’m
seeing so many people becoming very passionate about who they’re going to vote for and why.

EMMA  What excluded deaf people from the whole thing previously?

CHARLIE  I think for people who aren’t deaf obviously you can listen to the radio, you can hear debates, you listen to the news while you’re driving along in your car, you can watch live TV programmes like the news and Question Time – which for deaf people are often spoiled by mistakes in live subtitling and also delays in live subtitling. So, what you’re reading on the screen is actually something that has happened ten seconds previously so it’s hard to follow. But also for some deaf people there are issues with reading a lot of English because BSL is their first language and for a variety of reasons they may not be as comfortable with reading a great deal of English. So, there are a lot of issues that kind of added up to quite a big barrier.

But also it’s worth remembering that deaf people can’t just go along to a political event or a meeting locally, they can’t necessarily pop in and see their local MP or chat to a councillor. There are a lot of barriers just within real life as well. So, I think social media has just enabled deaf people to really have these discussions and to ask questions as well. During the most recent campaign deaf people can really ask the Conservative Party to provide a BSL manifesto, which they hadn’t done when a lot of parties had, but in the end it was only three days before the election that that finally came out. But that was driven by deaf people on Twitter sending videos with sign language in them that they’d made to the Conservative Party and continually asking them to do so. So, it’s giving deaf people a voice as well.

EMMA  So, Facebook you say is specifically really good and helping deaf people to engage. Were they using videos all the time or were they also using written? Because you did say that
British Sign Language is some people’s first language.

CHARLIE Yes absolutely. So, you do get some BSL videos on Facebook and it’s obviously a very easy way of doing it on Facebook; you’re basically just clicking a button and uploading your video. And then some people will reply in videos, but there’s also a great many written comments. I think there are a lot of deaf people who are BSL users who are still very happy to comment in written English some of the time. Obviously they’re not writing massive essays; they’ll be writing, just like anybody else, quite short responses. And I think they’re gaining more and more confidence in doing that and saying what their point of view is.

EMMA What were the issues that you found were most discussed by deaf voters? What were the things they were most interested in?

CHARLIE I think for deaf people like a lot of disabled people a really big issues is benefits: it’s issues with PIP assessments and how they felt going through that process; and there’s also worries over Access to Work, that’s about assistance with getting maybe interpreters, communication at work, along with a lot of other things. A really big factor, there’s a lot of passion obviously on my own feed which probably reflects a bit my own point of view, but there’s a lot of passion for the Labour Party in particular, and one of the reasons for that was the Labour Party pledged to fully legally recognised BSL so that really, really appealed to deaf people.

EMMA And do you think more deaf people voted in this election than in the last one?
CHARLIE  Definitely. And the reason for that is the number of people that I saw on voting day who were putting photographs online of them outside the polling station saying that they’d just voted. And one man in particular, this is somebody who is in his 40s, a very well-known deaf guy, he’s a prominent figure within the deaf community, he does all kinds of work with different groups, and he made a video saying, ‘this is the first time I’ve ever voted’ and he said, ‘the reason for that is I know about the parties, I know what the policies are and I feel I know enough to make my vote count’.

DAN  The Liberal Democrat MP for Eastbourne, I know we’re going to get onto the number of disabled MPs there are now a bit later, but he was hard of hearing and he was chosen as a candidate from all disabled shortlist. I was just interested whether he was a big celebrity amongst deaf people.

CHARLIE  I’ve met Stephen Lloyd, if that’s who you’re referring to.

DAN  Yes, it is Stephen Lloyd.

DAN  I’ve met Stephen and he comes across really well. He’s a very friendly person. He’s done a lot of work with the all-party committee for deafness, so he’s been involved and I think he is well-respected within the deaf world. So, it’s great that after I think a two-year break he was re-elected and has come back in because he certainly did a lot of work to bring in new policies that were favourable to deaf people.

DAN  Are deaf people feeling like, ‘yes we’re in there! We’ve been recognised and we’re represented in parliament now’? Because I was out filming with a deaf blind candidate and he was under the impression that BSL interpreters were not even allowed in the chamber, which we subsequently discovered is not true, it’s just that there has not been an occasion for them to be allowed in there in the
past because there haven’t been a significant number of deaf MPs before.

CHARLIE Yeah, I think that deaf people feel that they need more representation. But it also depends what kind of deaf person you are because there’s a great deal of variety in being deaf. So, you could be a deaf BSL user and you might feel that you don’t have somebody who reflects yourself because there isn’t a deaf signing MP, there isn’t an MP who depends on signing who would ask for an interpreter at the moment. A great many deaf people are like Stephen Lloyd who are deaf people who have a certain degree of hearing loss, who communicate mainly not through sign language, through spoken English; that reflects a great many deaf people so he’s certainly a role model for a lot of people.

But I can imagine people who are sign language users they’re probably hoping that one day there will be someone who uses sign language. And part of the reason for that is because signing is still not fully recognised legally as a language, which is unbelievable in 2017. So, I think to feel that there’s somebody in parliament using your language every day, which is a language that is used here in the United Kingdom, it’s a language that a great many people depend on, to see that in parliament would be a massive, massive thing for deaf sign language users.

So, I think that’s not quite what’s happening, but it is still great to see people, not only with a degree of deafness, but other disabilities in parliament. And it does seem as if now we have a much more diverse range of MPs than ever before, which is only a positive thing.

EMMA Yeah, we’ve got five MPs now: Marsha de Cordova who’s a Labour MP, she’s visually impaired.
DAN She was the one who just won Battersea against all the odds.

EMMA And then we have Jared O’Mara who’s got cerebral palsy and he’s also a Labour MP, and he beat Nick Clegg in Sheffield Hallam, so that’s another quite cool one. We’ve got Lib Dem MP Stephen Lloyd who we just spoke about who’s deaf or hard of hearing. And we’ve got the Conservative MPs Robert Halfan and Paul Maynard who also have cerebral palsy. Cerebral palsy is very well represented, isn’t it?

Charlie, thank you so much for coming on to talk us today. Can you let us know where people can read more of your stuff on Limping Chicken?

CHARLIE Yeah, absolutely, it’s limpingchicken.com and we have stories every day from the deaf perspective so yeah, it would be great if people could look at it. But thank you so much for having me; it’s lovely to speak to you.

DAN Nice to talk to you.

CHARLIE Thank you.

EMMA Dan, the snap election had a bit of a big effect on how things went for disabled people too, didn’t it, the fact that there was so little time between the calling of the election and the actual polling day itself?

DAN Well exactly. There were two major problems with is: one was, like you say, just because there was so little time. And the easy-read versions of the manifests which are designed largely for people with learning disabilities, they – how can I put this? – they don’t seem to be a top priority for the parties
in any case. There was some doubt as to whether they would actually get it together to publish them in the short turnaround from calling the election to the election actually being held. And in the event the Tory manifesto, the others came out quite close to polling day, but the Tory one was the slowest of all that came out just a week before. So, that was one thing.

But the other thing was just the logistics of getting disabled people to register and get everything in place that they would need takes time. For example at the last election there was this Operation Disabled vote, certainly in London, I’m not 100% sure if it ran outside London, which was going round and explaining to disabled people the issues and particularly to people with learning difficulties what voting meant, how they could register and so on and so on. And there just wasn’t time to run anything like that because the election was called so close and to people with disabilities it seemed to be quite a bit of an afterthought for a lot of the parties. I can say that evenly I think.

EMMA

Eleanor Lisney is on the line. Eleanor is one of the founders of the hashtag #CripTheVoteUK. What is Crip The Vote UK?

ELEANOR

Because, as Dan has mentioned, that it was such a short time for the snap election we suggested that we follow Crip The Vote in the US because they already had a whole framework. It is non-partisan, which doesn’t mean that we’re not critical, but it means that we try to tell people all the information without telling them how to vote.

EMMA

So, Crip The Vote UK is a hashtag.
EMMA  That’s something that people can follow on a number of social media services, so on Twitter if you search for the hashtag you can see all the tweets that are based on that hashtag, and on Facebook to a lesser extent, and also on Instagram. Were they the three social networks that you went to?

ELEANOR  We also had stories on Tumblr. So, people were encouraged to write their stories and then we published on the Tumblr account. I have some statistics if you want to know?

EMMA  Sure.

ELEANOR  The Twitter account generated 1.3 million impressions over the course of the General Election campaign. And the hashtag actually reached more than 500,000 Twitter users. And within the first two weeks we reached 1,000 Twitter followers and we trended to number four within the UK.

EMMA  That’s really positive. What is Crip The Vote? What is the aim of it?

ELEANOR  The aim is to get as many disabled voters voting, which is why we had all the Twitter chats which were comprehensive about media representation, about hate crimes and there was also on students and Brexit, which is quite important.

EMMA  And were they well-attended and did lots of people ask and answer questions during those Twitter accounts? Did you feel like people were engaged in those topics?
ELEANOR  Oh definitely. I think people were definitely engaged, even if they didn’t re-tweet or tweet you could see that a lot of people were reading this.

EMMA  The name, we talked about this a little bit a couple of podcasts ago, the name Crip The Vote UK might alienate some people, even some disabled people, but particularly people who might be stakeholders or who might be helping people with learning disabilities and that kind of thing, it might alienate them from the hashtag because of the word crip. Was that ever a worry or was that ever a problem?

ELEANOR  Quite a few people have mentioned that and we actually have quite a clear explanation why the word crip was used. It’s to do with the disability movement and it also cuts across all impairments. Some people object to the word disabled. You can’t please everybody. But the word crip is a sense of belonging as well I think.

EMMA  It’s kind of a reclaimed community word for some people.

ELEANOR  Yes it is definitely.

DAN  It’s also short, isn’t it, so it fits neatly into 144 characters. What was the impact on non-disabled people? Did you manage to cut through to them with the hashtag?

ELEANOR  We have been followed by several members of the House of Lords, quite a number of MPs and local councillors and by the Labour, DWP shadow team, which is an encouraging sign. But it’s difficult to know who is non-disabled just by looking at somebody’s Twitter handle. So, that’s all I can say really.
DAN  Is that part of the intention though that you would publicise disabled issues for non-disabled people as well as sharing information amongst disabled people?

ELEANOR  Yeah obviously. Actually we’re trying not just to preach to the choir; to reach as wide an audience as possible. That’s why we also post a lot of stats about disabled people and all the different matters that matter to us as disabled people.

EMMA  Thank you so much again Eleanor. I’m sure you’re quite glad that it’s over in a lot of ways.

ELEANOR  Yeah, but it’s not certain what’s happening, is it, so I think we’ve still got some way to go.

EMMA  Absolutely. Bye Eleanor.

ELEANOR  Bye bye, thank you.

EMMA  Thank you so much, Dan, for imparting all your gained knowledge from the last few weeks.

DAN  It’s an absolute pleasure.

EMMA  This has been Inside Ouch. I’m Emma Tracey. That was Daniel Gordon. Thanks to Eleanor Lisney and Charlie Swinbourne as well, and thanks to Niamh on the desk there too.

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us on Twitter @bbcouch.