



# Vision Changing Charity

RNIB in Socio-Political  
Context 1970-2010

Ian Bruce



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RNIB in Socio-Political Context,  
1970-2010

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To my family, particularly Tina who supported and inspired me; to all those blind and partially sighted people who included me; to staff colleagues and trustees, especially my RNIB chairs, who guided me sensitively.



# Contents

List of Illustrations	xiii
Foreword by Matt Stringer, RNIB Chief Executive	xvii
Introduction	xix

## **Part I. Four Decades of Change**

1a. 1970-80: How Blind People Took Back Control of RNIB	3
What Happened?	4
Societal Influences for Change	19
Internal Influences for Change	19
Pressure from RNIB's Blind Consumers	21
1b. Progress in the Face of a Dominant Welfare State	23
Impressive Services Development	25
Campaigning – the RNIB Giant Stirs	26
Resources – Growth	26
People – New Leaders	28
Conclusion – External Pressures Build	34
2a. 1980-90: Early Adoption of Strategic Planning	36
Threats to Single Impairment Causes	37
First Thoughts on Changes Needed	41

Second Thoughts – More Radical	42
The First Strategy (RNIB 1987)	48
What Action Resulted – Strategy Implementation	53
Factors For and Against Success	59
Reviewing Our Implementation – Crucial for ‘Buy-in’	62
Conclusion – Major, Planned Change Implemented	63
2b. Far-reaching Change	66
Services – Established and New	66
Campaigning – Brave Beginnings	69
People – New Professionals	72
Resources – More Income but More Spend	77
Conclusion – More Activity and Money in a Changing State	83
3a 1990-2000: RNIB Can’t Do It All	84
Expansion of Indirect Interventions: Advising, Influencing and Campaigning	84
3b. Expansion and Extension	96
Progress of the First Strategy, 1985-95	97
A New Strategy for 1994-2000	98
How Successful Was the Second Strategy, 1994/95-2000?	102
Direct Service Growth	104
Campaigning – Example of Accessible Digital Communications	108
People – Training, Development and Recognition	110

Resources – Growing the Brand, Fees and Fundraising	115
Conclusion – Major Growth in Activity and Reach	125
4a. 2000-10: Governance and Merger Revolution	126
Historical Legitimacy	127
Becoming an ‘of’ Organisation	128
Blind Membership	130
Executive Systems Changes	131
RNIB Co-operation with the VI Sector	134
Partnerships through ‘Associated Charities’ – Major Mergers	137
Conclusion	138
4b. Services: Launches, Relaunches and Closures	141
Renewing Services	141
Campaigning – Increased Focus and Investment	150
People – New Leadership	157
Finance – Growth through Acquisition	163
Fundraising – Building Strong, Loyal Relationships	164
Creating RNIB Cymru, RNIB NI and RNIB Scotland	168
Moving HQ to a State-of-the-Art Service Centre	170
Recruiting More Volunteers	173
Sustainability – Early Adoption	173
Planning, Impact and Service Evidence	174
Conclusion	174

## **Part II. Forty-year Trends in the Charity in Socio-Political Context**

5.	External Impacts 1970 to 2010	177
	Society-wide Impacts	177
	Social Welfare Sector Impacts	179
	Trends in the Charity Sector	185
	Disability Politics	195
6.	Trends within RNIB	206
	Discovering and Reaching Many More People	206
	Reach – to New Kinds of People	208
	New Ways of Working	214
	New Needs, New Needs Markets	218
7.	Strategic and Structural Change	227
	Governance – Fewer Trustees, Half to Be Blind or Partially Sighted	227
	Organisation Structure – Mainly Evolution, Latterly More Dramatic	230
	Increased Role of Marketing and Strategic Planning and Implementation	232
8.	Friends and Foes – Campaigning and Lobbying	245
	Relationships – from Brave and Alone, to Disability United, to Sight Loss United	245
	Campaigning and Lobbying	252
9.	Resources – People and Money	257
	People and People Policies	257
	Finances	264
10.	Milestones – but a Long Way to Go	276
	Decade-by-Decade Developments	276
	Conclusion	280

Contents	xi
Postscript	285
References	287
Appendices	295
List of Organisational Initials and Acronyms	295
Organisation Chart 1990	298
RNIB Management Conference Attendance – 1985, 1991, 1997 and 2003	299
Index of Names	323
Index of Subjects	337



## List of Illustrations

Unless otherwise stated, all images are reproduced by permission of RNIB

1	Eric Boulter and Duncan Watson	10
2	Alf Morris with Lord Head	15
3	A bedtime story at Rushton Hall School	24
4	Chorleywood school for girls	55
5	New College, Worcester	55
6	Learning recipes at Redhill College	57
7	New presses at Peterborough, 1989	62
8	RNIB Vocational College Loughborough	67
9	RNIB School of Physiotherapy gains degree accreditation	68
10	Harold Macmillan meets Eddie Venn and a Sunshine House School student	73
11	Margaret Thatcher meeting a blind boy at RNIB Northwood	74
12	RNIB President, the Duke of Westminster, being shown the Talking Books workshop	77
13	A 'Sooty' collection box	80

14	A blind man driving from John O'Groats to Lands End	82
15	Britain's first large print newspaper	105
16	Roger Smith running a student radio show	106
17	Cycle maintenance training at Redhill	106
18	RNIB relaunch, 1993	116
19	Logo change 1993	117
20	Launching the Phone Card with Stevie Wonder, 1995	121
21	Sir Cameron Mackintosh introduces the cast of <i>Hey Mr Producer</i> to the Queen <i>Credit Adrian Brooks</i>	122
22	The launch of the UK Vision Strategy, April 2008	136
23	Warehousing for RNIB Shopping Online	144
24	Colin Low and the Right to Read Campaign	156
25	Lesley-Anne Alexander and RNIB staff	158
26	RNIB Cymru Annual Review 1999/2000	168
27	Mike Cairns of RNIB Scotland receives a campaigning award, 2002	168
28	RNIB at 224 Great Portland Street	170
29	The new headquarters at Judd Street	171
30	Judd St Resource Centre	171
31	The UK delegation at an EBU General Assembly, Poland 1993 <i>Credit Carol Bird</i>	178
32	Campaigning for greater rights across Westminster Bridge, Nov 1989 <i>Credit Graham Turner</i>	181

List of Illustrations	xv
33 Mrs Nimi Handa testing our Talking Books in Hindi	210
34 Older guests at one of our four hotels enjoying Eastbourne	212
35 Music and movement at RNIB Sunshine House School	216
36 Campaigning against charges for eye tests, 1989	222
37 Returning and despatching Talking Books	233
38 2007 rebranding	243
39 Leaked letter warning about proposed benefits cuts, Dec 1997 <i>Credit RNIB/Ian Bruce</i>	249
40 Meeting Tony Blair, Harriet Harman and Alan Howarth at No. 10, 1998 <i>Credit Terry Moore</i>	250
41 DBC press briefing after the meeting at No. 10 <i>Credit Terry Moore</i>	250
42 Campaigning for free treatment for wet AMD	253
43 The 'take an eye test' campaign <i>Credit Adrian Brooks</i>	254
44 RNIB supporters pull a jumbo jet at Gatwick to raise money	271
45 Braille at Rushton Hall School in the 70s	273



# Foreword

As the current RNIB chief executive officer (CEO) with a history degree under my belt from 30 years ago, I was delighted when I learned that Ian Bruce was completing a history of RNIB from 1970 to 2010. We can learn a lot from the past and, if there ever was a time we needed to, it is now. The world is changing fast with real challenges within societal and economic shifts. Climate change needs to be addressed, technology informs our lives, culture wars abound and there are very recent geopolitical challenges to the established liberal world order. Understanding where we have come from is always useful to work out where we should go, and how we should navigate the challenges and opportunities that result from change.

As Ian Bruce draws out, charities have a significant role to play in combatting this turmoil. Their rights and responsibilities have grown dramatically over the end of the twentieth and the start of the twenty-first centuries. Charities, of which RNIB is one, are organisations which are used to working against the odds and winning, eventually. RNIB is a charity which has been tenacious since 1868 in fighting for the rights of blind and partially sighted people and developing and delivering much needed services. As this book makes clear, we have an enviable track record, maintained to this day, to deliver focussed services, based on the needs and wishes of our beneficiaries.

This history describes the evolving organisational techniques we have used to achieve this through applying

socio-educational professionalisms combined with organisational methods such as strategic planning, marketing and HR policies. Mostly, we have been successful and sometimes we have failed but always we have learned.

Indeed, RNIB will learn from this history and I believe others can too as we are in many ways a typical large British charity which Ian Bruce has placed in an evolving socio-political setting. Those 'others' to my mind include other charities, students of politics and sociology, people who work for charities and non-profit organisations who want to learn from our successes and mistakes, especially students on charity management courses and, of course, historians of the voluntary sector.

As a major charity RNIB has involved and employed many thousands of staff and volunteers over this history, making it a team effort. I commend Ian for naming so many of them, inevitably a tiny fraction, but showing the co-operative nature of our enterprise.

Matt Stringer,  
RNIB Chief Executive

# Introduction

To begin with a practical message, those readers who are primarily interested in the history of the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) and visual impairment might want to start with Part I. Those who are more interested in broader charity history, social welfare policy, charity management and organisation might like to start with Part II.

RNIB is one of Britain's largest charities. It was founded in 1868 in an inspirational way that would still be impressive today. Dr Thomas Rhodes Armitage was a surgeon who went blind. With four blind friends he founded the British and Foreign Society for Improving Embossed Literature for the Blind with the primary objects of the education and employment of blind people and the provision of embossed literature which included braille.

The society's foundation was inspirational in several ways: blind people came together to help each other and others in the same situation – an example of mutual aid; instead of using sighted experts, they conducted their own research to find the best methods and tools to help blind people to be independent; the organisation was led by a blind person, Armitage, and for the first nineteen years of its existence all board members had to be blind; and the Board tried to be as objective as possible in its conclusions and actions. Take the example of embossed writing. In the nineteenth century there were over a dozen different forms of embossed writing for blind people. The group tried them all out and chose, not one of the several English systems, but the one of a Frenchman,

Louis Braille. It was Armitage and his blind colleagues who guaranteed the dominance of braille across the world.

This exciting start and the activities which followed were recorded in the history of RNIB by Mary Thomas who covered the first 88 years to 1956 (Thomas 1957). June Rose in her history included the period up to the late 1960s (Rose 1970). My contribution starts there and ends in 2010.

I hope you will not judge this history on terminology. Our use of language changes regularly, especially terms associated with groups discriminated against, in general, and disability, in particular. Over this 40-year period (1970-2010) we have had 'the blind' (e.g. as in the National Federation of the Blind of the UK); we have had 'visually handicapped', 'visually impaired', 'sight loss' and so on. There are supporters even now for each of these terms. I have used the full panoply, often choosing a particular term according to preference of the decade. Personally, I have always preferred 'blind and partially sighted people', except it takes so long to type!

I should declare an interest – I was chief executive of RNIB for 20 of these 40 years from late 1983 to the end of 2003. I am not an historian. However, even historians come with points of view, while seeking to balance the dual contributions of evidence and interpretation. Clearly, I am favourably disposed towards RNIB and cannot claim to be neutral but, as an academic, I have tried to be as objective as possible in presenting evidence. The advantage I have is that, having been actively involved as chief executive or vice president for approaching 30 of the 40 years, I have much more inside knowledge than an external historian could collect, both about RNIB and the voluntary and community sector of which it is a part. The role of what I see as 'activist observation' needs more attention in the fields of history and memory studies, especially where participant memories are triangulated with records and interviews as I have done (Keightley and Pickering, 2013; Fivush, 2013; Brown and Reavey, 2013). For this study I am grateful to RNIB for unfettered access to records and the official archive, to the dozen RNIB staff and

trustees who have read and commented on drafts and to the hundred or more people to whom I have spoken to check facts, recollections and interpretations.

To make fuller sense, a history of RNIB has to be set in the context of the changing role of charities and disabled people in society. Here are my observations (Bruce 2018) on the changes which have taken place in and to charities in general over the 40 years, 1970 to 2010, into which the history of RNIB nestles (I draw on other views, facts and figures later):

- The growth of the sector – both money and people – has enabled a major scaling up of sector roles such as service delivery, policy promotion, innovation and co-ordination.
- Changing support/popularity of causes: environment and arts – up; disabled and old people – down; children, animals and social welfare – unchanged.
- Skills developed: in finance, human resources (HR), marketing, market research, fundraising (F/R), governance, communications (especially social media) and strategy.
- Policy developments embraced: lobbying, campaigning, public education, use by government of our (and the commercial) sector to test controversial initiatives or ideas, charities' statements of recommended practice, diversity, governance and social media.
- Policy changes forced on us: marketisation, commissioning, statutory transfers (of services and assets), the entry of more and more powerful commercial providers into our markets (e.g. Serco, Capita).
- Policy implementations regarded with ambivalence: mainstreaming versus specialisation, mergers, beneficiary rights, European Union (EU) impact, co-operation with professional associations and employment law.

For those interested in an overview of how RNIB responded over 40 years to these various impacts, Part II might be a good place to start reading.

In Part I, recognising the inspirational first two nineteenth-century decades of RNIB's history when blind people ran the charity, what better subject to start with in this book than the heady time between the late 1960s and the first half of the 1970s. This was when representative blind people effectively wrested control of RNIB back to themselves. This start-time also resonates with the finishing decade of this history when in 2001/02 RNIB changed from being an organisation 'for' the blind into one 'of' the blind by becoming a membership organisation with a legal requirement for the majority of its trustees to be blind or partially sighted.

I should like to thank all those who have commented on early drafts including Lesley-Anne Alexander, Tony Aston, Carol Bird, Fazilet Hadi, Stephen King, Lord Colin Low, David Mann, Bill Poole, Jeff Shear, John Wall, Duncan Watson, John Wall and, above all, Professor Fred Reid who as an academic historian helped me greatly with his advice and comments. I am grateful for the active support of the current chief executive of RNIB, Matt Stringer, Sophie Castell, Amelia Billington, Jessica Eaton, Alison Long, David Wilson and especially Jane Backlog, internal project leader, as well as Richard Orme, a valued former colleague from RNIB; and those who have guided me through the publication process: Adrian Brink, Samuel Fitzgerald and Ana Alemida at The Lutterworth Press, and Dorothy Luckurst for her copy-editing. As is normal any mistakes are down to me as author.

To the extent that RNIB has been successful, this has been achieved by thousands of people over the 40 years. I have tried to mention some but clearly most are omitted. If you are one such, or feel under-recognised and are prepared to share experiences, please do contact me.

Lastly, I want to acknowledge my three chairs: Sir Duncan Watson, Sir John Wall and Lord Colin Low who all gave me such great encouragement and support, so vital if a chief executive is to stand a chance of being successful. Our

relationship endured long after I stepped down from my role of director general – I dare to call them my friends.

Ian Bruce, April 2022

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## **Part I**

# **Four Decades of Change**



## Chapter 1a

# 1970-80: How Blind People Took Back Control of RNIB

In the late 1960s an extraordinary and radical notion was growing on the periphery of RNIB which would result in the transfer of governance from the hands of the sighted to blind people. To start at the end: in 1975 the Executive Council (EC), the body legally responsible for governing RNIB, transformed its composition to contain 30 blind representatives of organisations of blind people in addition to 14 individual blind council members out of a total of 111 sitting members. By the time I arrived in 1983 it was a whipped group of 30 voting as a block, with the regular support of many of the individual blind council members. It effectively controlled the trustee council on the majority of issues. It even met the evening before council to decide the line to be taken on major issues, which usually carried the day.

Viewed many years later this transformation may not look radical, but at the time it was for two main reasons, one external and one internal. First, none of the other major disability service charities, such as Royal National Institute for the Deaf, Scope (then the Spastics Society), Mencap, Leonard Cheshire and Guide Dogs for the Blind Association (GDBA) were near to giving the controlling influence in governance to their beneficiaries, and certainly not to formal

representatives of their beneficiaries. Their related beneficiary membership organisations (organisations 'of' where the majority of trustees are relatedly disabled) were kept at a safe distance. As late as 2011, some in the above charities still did not have governance in the hands of formal representatives of their beneficiaries.

The internal reason that this was a radical change for RNIB was the conservative character of RNIB – not for RNIB the radical campaigning advertising of the then Spastics Society.

How did this progressive change come about, against the external norm and in such an internal conservative setting? Researching this part of RNIB's history involved discussion with over 30 people who were active at the time, both staff and trustees, blind and sighted, conservative and radical; and reading the minutes of all the Executive Council, committee and formal one-off meetings. The story, as is often the case, is about able and committed people being in the right place at the right time. How they became so able, and who put or allowed them into the right place, is also significant, as is RNIB's historical tradition of democratic and accountable governance.

## **What Happened?**

On the outside, demanding greater power and authority in RNIB were the organisations 'of' blind people, predominantly the United Kingdom National Federation of the Blind (NFB or the Federation) and the National League of the Blind and Disabled (NLBD or the League). Also included were around 20 or so other special interest groups of blind people such as the Braille Chess Association, the Association of Blind Piano Tuners (APBT), Circle of Guide Dog Owners (COGDO) and, in particular, the newly formed Association of Blind and Partially Sighted Teachers and Students (ABAPSTAS) whose leaders were particularly active. The late 1960s and early 1970s was a period of renaissance and birth of organisations of blind people creating a vibrant, confident atmosphere

despite some tension between the League and the Federation. In terms of leadership, key players included: from the NFB, Martin Milligan (formerly of the NLBD), Fred Reid, Colin Low, Stan Lovell and Barbara Bussey; and from the NLBD, Tom Parker and Dan West. All these people were blind.

On the inside of the Royal National Institute 'for' the Blind, while decisions were ultimately taken by the full Executive Council of over 100 people, the lead was always given by what was in effect the executive committee called the Policy and Selection Committee. The key players included: John Colligan (sighted) who was director general until 1972 and Eric Boulter who succeeded him as the first blind director general; Lord Head (sighted), chairman until 1975; Duncan Watson, vice chairman until 1975 (blind), and then chairman; the three chairs of the standing committees (two sighted) which included another future chair, John Wall (blind); and in the background the deputy director general, Eddie Venn (sighted).

## **Timeline of Events**

### **1969**

Resolution No 16 passed at the 1969 Annual Delegate Conference of the National Federation of the Blind of the UK demanded that 50 per cent of the representatives on the governing boards of all charities whose 'sole purpose is to serve blind people' were to be blind 'representatives elected by, and answerable to, blind people'.

Contrast that call for 50 per cent with the eight per cent at the time and one can begin to understand, first, how far apart the two sides were, second, how radical, verging on foolhardy, the demand was and, third, how unreasonable, verging on outrageous, the demand must have seemed to the RNIB establishment. Add in the supremely confident air of RNIB, one of the top charities in the country in terms of size and popular affection, and I doubt that the RNIB Goliath even recognised it was looking at David, in the form of the

organisations of blind people. They were puny in comparison, with only the League having, for example, any paid staff.

### **1971**

The NFB's campaign and the rising interest from organisations of the blind wishing to become members of RNIB's Executive Council was such that the powerful RNIB Policy and Selection Committee at its 1 April 1971 meeting agreed to set up a sub-committee: 'to consider the applications for vacancies in Group D [organisations 'of' the blind] and to look into the question of participation of the blind generally with regard to the rules laid down in the Royal Charter; and to submit a report at the next meeting'.

While the NFB was a tightly directed and focussed group of players pressing the demands of Resolution No. 16 from its national conference, there was a much wider troupe playing than just NFB and the NLBD. At the beginning of 1971 ABAP-STAS (teachers) and COGDO (Guide Dog owners) were both pressing formally for membership of RNIB's Executive Council and this also helped to force the pace.

Critical to decision making in RNIB was, and is, the committee system. Discussions and decisions are formally recorded, signed off by the relevant chairs (then appositely called chairmen) and subsequently agreed as an accurate record by the full committee as minutes of the meeting, providing detailed records of the period in question. The following texts within quotation marks are taken straight from these formal records unless otherwise stated.

So, by April 1971, progress was being made and RNIB Goliath probably thought it was putting out substantial peace offerings to David, namely, the sub-committee set up on 1 April and the agreement to fill four dormant places reserved for representatives on Executive Council. This raised the formal numbers from eight to twelve. However, this was the moment when the first of David's sling shots hit home.

RNIB has traditionally been nervous of adverse national publicity (as opposed to professional and technical criticism). The next phase of the campaign was launched in

May 1971 with an NFB pamphlet entitled *An Equal Say in Our Own Affairs* (1971). This argued for blind representation on mainstream, as well as specialist, organisations impacting on blind people's lives, including local government and organisations for the blind, of which the RNIB was the largest and the primary focus. This short, 2,000-word document was covered in the then pre-Murdoch bastion of the Establishment, *The Times*, on the Saturday of the 1971 Annual Delegate Conference in May, triggered by a press release. The next day, it was covered by the *News of the World* and the *Observer*. What is more, the *Observer* article praising the pamphlet's demands was written by none other than Des Wilson, arch campaigner, founding director of Shelter and soon to lead a successful crusade against all the odds to get lead taken out of petrol.

RNIB must have been reeling with shock. Everyone went home on Friday night and by Monday the attack by the blind people's lobby was national news – the campaign was now on a publicity roll. *The World at One*, one of the most influential national BBC radio programmes, picked it up, interviewing John Colligan, then director general, and Colin Low from the Federation as equals. If RNIB ever thought they could ignore the issue, it was now impossible. Nevertheless, Colin Low reports (in a personal communication) that the interviewer briefed them beforehand in terms which asked for a 'responsible discussion' because 'there is a lot of money at stake' – meaning potential loss of donations to the RNIB caused by adverse publicity. It is unlikely that the rugged approach of the producer of *The World at One* would have naturally thought about that. It is more likely that this concern was fed to the producer from RNIB. This suggests the level of its concern, and the need to try to spike the Federation's guns as an increasingly dangerous opponent.

However, RNIB must have withstood this national attack and regained its confidence because when the sub-committee reviewing formal representation met a month later on 24 June 1971 it concluded that: 'they [RNIB] had done everything in their power in respect of ensuring a major

participation of the blind in the two groups [D and E] over which RNIB could exercise any control' (taken from the minutes of the meeting).

By way of background, the RNIB Executive Council (the then trustee body) contained five blocks of membership:

- local societies for the blind – Group A
- local authorities (which served visually impaired [VI] people) – Group B
- other national organisations for the blind (with the exception of the Guide Dogs for the Blind Association who were initially not interested and later declined an invitation to join) – Group C
- organisations of the blind – Group D (this was the group which the campaign wished to expand to make it 50 per cent of the trustee total and take the number from eight to 55 out of 110)
- individuals with a particular contribution, one third of whom had to be blind – Group E.

So, what had RNIB done which was 'everything in their power'? First, it filled four dormant vacant seats in Group D from eight up to the Royal Charter limit of twelve by accepting the applications of ABPT (piano tuners), ABAPSTAS (teachers and students), COGDO (guide dog owners) and the British Computer Association of the Blind (BCAB); second, it rejected a request from NFB for two more places on the grounds that it was inequitable for the Federation to have more places than the larger National League of the Blind and Disabled; third, it appointed a blind person to fill one of the three vacancies in Group E; fourth, it decided not to increase the proportion of seats in Group E allocated to blind people; and, fifth, it set up a further sub-committee to look at 'what improvements could be made in public relations with the blind' (in the discussion of the latter it is recorded that 'the Institute's publicity department was continually feeding information to the press but very little appeared in print' – much in contrast to the NFB's successes).

## 1972

So far, the evidence suggests that the Federation was acting largely alone or even in some tension with the League and perhaps other organisations of blind people. For example, it is unlikely that the NFB's request in the first half of 1971 for two extra seats on Group D would have gone down well with the NLBD because, if granted, it would have given the smaller Federation double the seats of the larger League. However, at his report to the NFB Executive Council in January 1972, Colin Low, on behalf of the Federation's Participation Campaign Committee (PCC), proposed that it 'should take some initiative "in bringing the organisations 'of' on RNIB Executive Council together", in advance of meetings, to "co-ordinate strategy and tactics on a number of issues of common interest"' (*Viewpoint* [March/May 1972], p. 20). Given the relative lack of success to date in achieving its goal of 50 per cent blind representation, this would be a logical tactical adjustment for the NFB, that is, to change from a solo campaign to a coalition one with its concomitant advantages and disadvantages (Bruce 2011, p. 160).

The second proposal presented by Low on behalf of the PCC was for the demand to RNIB to be modified by asking for an increase in the total number of RNIB EC members from 110 to 120 to allow an increase in the number of Group D places, without such a harsh reduction in the numbers in other categories. Once again, this is a logical tactical move to reduce opposition from other council interest groups.

The formal request for council expansion was submitted and considered specifically by the RNIB Policy and Selection Committee on 6 July 1972 but it decided to defer consideration of this suggestion until local government reorganisation had a clearer impact on the composition of Group B (representatives from local government) – clarity being anticipated in early 1973.

Any thought that the major differences on participation meant a total stand-off between RNIB and organisations of blind people or even between NFB and RNIB would be wrong. For example, on 28 October 1973 Barbara Bussey

reported to the NFB Executive Council 'that she and Mr Lovell had been making progress on Federation Resolutions not only with Mr Boulter [RNIB's blind, new director general, who succeeded John Colligan] but also with other officials and committees'. This is partial evidence of a fairly widely held view among people I spoke to and who were there at the time that Eric Boulter's arrival coincided with a thawing of some of the more icy relations, and a start of a more sympathetic hearing of the concerns and suggestions of the organisations of blind people.

Evidence of increasing co-operation between NFB and NLBD on the campaign shows in the Federation's Executive Council report of 27 January 1973 in the March/May 1973 *Viewpoint* in which it was reported that the NFB president, Ken Whitton, had agreed with Tom Parker, the NLBD's general secretary, that NFB would support the League's



**Eric Boulter (L), Director General RNIB, and Duncan Watson, Vice Chairman, during the last 3 years of talks, 1972-5.**

proposal for a Consumers Committee in RNIB. Stan Lovell also reported that NFB representatives felt 'they had made an impact' at the December 1972 meeting of RNIB EC and, in light of this, they agreed that: 'the Federation should not push for more co-opted places on institute's council and committees so long as other organisations did not do so'.

### 1973

Meanwhile, there were other attempts at dialogue and bridge building with RNIB such that, on 5 April 1973, Duncan Watson was able to report to RNIB's Policy and Selection Committee on:

a very useful discussion with three members of the group [i.e. Group D, blind representatives], who had

been elected to present verbal evidence on behalf of Group D ...

the possible creation of a new committee composed of blind users of RNIB equipment and services [the NLBD demand] ... .

The Policy and Selection Committee supported this progress and 'hoped that all necessary action for amendment of the byelaws ... would be completed by spring 1974'.

This shows an important shift in RNIB's position since summer 1971. There was now an assumption that the byelaws would have to be amended to allow the numbers in the groups to be changed; and thus a more substantial increase in Group D would be feasible. The other detail hidden in this minute is that Martin Milligan, as one of the 'three members of the group' (the other two being Stan Lovell, also from NFB, and Tom Parker from NLBD) had been drawn into the direct negotiations for the first time. Martin Milligan was one of the main drivers of NFB's Resolution No 16 in 1969, along with Fred Reid and Colin Low. He was chair of the Federation's Participation Campaign Committee and a force to be reckoned with.

Another sign in 1973 of the bridge building was the decision to circulate the minutes of the top RNIB committee, Policy and Selection, to all 100 plus members of RNIB Council (reported by the NFB representative, Barbara Bussey in *Viewpoint* [September/November 1973]). As the organisations of blind people (Group D) had no representation at that stage on this top committee, this access to the minutes gave them the detail of the committee's deliberations which the traditional oral report to Council would not have done. It may also have had the effect of muting RNIB opposition on the committee to the participation campaign because views expressed might well be minuted and thus become public – whereas before they would have remained private.

In the latter half of 1973 a more public debate on participation was triggered by an article in the September issue of