An article about Megan Du Biosson from The Catholic Herald - 7th March 1969

PAULA DAVIES describes Megan du Boisson's campaign for pensions —

It would be tempting to describe Megan du Boisson as a cripple who has overcome a terrible handicap. It wouldn't be true, for the founder of the Disablement Income Group (DIG) can never overcome the progressively paralysing disease of multiple sclerosis. Yet at the same time she is a person who has come to terms with an illness to such an extent that it doesn't appear to exist at all to the outsider.

A happy and apparently contented person, she reminds me of a woman I knew who, despite the fact that she lived alone, that she had no children and her husband was dead, despite a leg in irons and encroaching old age, was one of the happiest and most cheerful women I've ever met.

"I've had a wonderful life," she used to say. "I've been very happy, so naturally I am content." Megan du Boisson thinks that she too is one of the lucky people despite a creeping paralysis which eventually destroys the use of limbs, eyes, speech but never actually kills. "The whole of my life has been one of good fortune." she said. "It's a traumatic experience facing a life sentence as I did when I found out about my illness six years ago.

Psychotherapy helped

"But I was lucky enough to have a course of psychotherapy which I wish everyone who suffers this kind of shock could have. I didn't believe it at first. I was terrified and bitterly depressed and you can't find hope until you come out the other side of fear.

"The fear was always there at one time. I had to get it into the open and face it. If you can do this then you can turn fear into something hopeful and creative." In creating DIG Megan du Boisson offers hope to others like her and obviously would fight for ever for what she regards as the rights of the disabled in a society which would rather not know
about their problems. A pretty, gentle-faced woman, relaxing when I met her on one of
those canvas garden beds, she has a charm and sweetness which hardly seems
compatible with founding an organisation so dynamic as a pressure group that it has
brought home the problems of the disabled to governments as well as people.

Instead of campaigning for more welfare or better facilities—worthy but vague causes—
DIG has picked on the core of the disabled problem, lack of money. "When I first
became ill," said Megan du Boisson, "I realised that help would be vital at home. I
stopped to think what would happen if my husband couldn't afford it.

"Obviously there must be some State benefit for people like me. I found out that there is
nothing, for the housewife is the only adult left outside any form of social security in
respect of sickness and disability.

"Having found that there was nothing for the married woman whose work at home did
not earn her any money. I started to look at what there was for anyone else. And the
tragedy I found was that it was not the extent of a disability that mattered but where and
how it occurred. If you were injured on a job for the CATHOLIC HERALD" (a faint
prospect I trust) "and you could prove that your injuries resulted solely from your doing
that job you might receive a pension of as much as £21 a week. If however you
contracted a disabling disease and as a result were unable to work, either in the home
or outside it, you would get precisely nothing." There are 1,500,000 severely disable
d people of working age in this country. Help for them is essential and DIG believes that
the best way of helping them is to provide enough money for them to be able to help
themselves.

Rights to security

Article 25 of the Declaration of Human Rights says that everyone has the "right to
security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age . . ." The
only one which goes unrecognised in our present system of social security is disability.
This entails loss of earnings, loss of freedom and expenses which the disabled
themselves are least able to bear.

"We want recognition," said Megan du Boisson, "that disability which entails all these
problems is a category meriting special and adequate provision as of right."

What DIG wants to see in the immediate future is a disability pension and allowances
comparable with that available to those injured industrially or in the services. It also
wants the needs of the disabled housewife specifically recognised.

"The loss of faculty for the enjoyment of life" is how disability is described in the
Industrial Act. To compound this loss by heartless anomalies in the law seems
unbelievable. One would have thought that the disability was enough without adding to
it. But look at it this way. If a man has not sufficient money to pay for help for his
disabled wife—remember she gets nothing—then he may have to stay at home to look
after her. Thus he can't earn any money. It is a particularly vicious circle. Those with an
industrial injury pension or service pension for 20 per cent disability or more can work
while retaining their pensions. Other disabled persons have their illness treated, for
allowance purposes, as short-term sickness benefit, indefinitely prolonged. If they earn
more than a small amount they will lose this benefit. These disabled receive £4 10s.
under National Insurance compared with an industrial injury pension of £21 2s.
**Question of dignity**

If a disabled person is not entitled to Sickness Benefit such as a young adult who was disabled as a child and can never work, then he or she has to rely on Supplementary Benefit—what was once known as National Assistance—to the magnificent tune of £4 1 Is., less than that if he is not a householder.

Here one might ask as I did, doesn't it come to the same thing in the end because no government is going to provide the civilian disabled with a sufficiently large pension? A small pension would probably not amount to much more than the present amount paid out in supplementary allowances.

**Why demand a special pension?**

"First," said Mrs. du Boisson, "there is the question of dignity and secondly it would be a great deal cheaper to administrate. Unlike a retirement pension which is granted as of right and regarded, like unemployment benefit, as a specific allowance for a specific condition, a supplementary allowance for disability has to be proved to be necessary". In assessing such an allowance, National Insurance benefits and family allowances have to be deducted. This all sounds so complicated that it is probably why, until DIG came along, we haven't paid much attention to the problem. Last month, however, when the Government White Paper on pensions was published, the first fruits of DIG's efforts can be seen.

As Mrs. du Boisson put it: "At last the civilian disabled are recognised as existing in the new Attendance Allowance which will be paid to those 'with a handicap so severe that it makes them wholly or largely dependent on help from other people in coping with the functions of daily living'." There is also an added benefit which allows a new earnings-related long-term sickness benefit after the short-term sickness benefit ends. The paragraph continues: "For those who are not able to return to work it will be in effect an invalidity pension which will continue until pension age and will then be replaced by retirement Pension."

'To him that hath . . .

To anyone like me unfamiliar with the jargon about pensions, superannuation, allowances, benefits and so on the above seems eminently reasonable. But, as Megan du Boisson points out: "It will not be an invalidity pension either in effect or in fact for it does not take into account the cost of invalidity and is paid at the same rate to those with a greater or lesser degree of disability. "Those who are disabled later in life can have earned more and will therefore receive more in an earnings related scheme. To him that hath shall be given," sighed Mrs. du Boisson. "What would constitute an invalidity pension would be assessment according to the degree of incapacity." Despite the great ballyhoo about a new deal for the disabled there is little to give DIG comfort in this particular White Paper, though it is hoped that the Government Social Survey on the chronic sick and disabled will throw enough light on the problem to prompt further action.