

# DISABILITY 'APARTHEID' WORSENS

SENATOR SUE BOYCE

Following his death in June this year, the late Rev Dr Christopher Newell AM was described by the Tasmanian Anglican Church as “a humanitarian, an intellectual giant, and a champion of the disabled”.

The disability community was lucky to have the contributions of such an outstanding advocate during his short 44-year life.

For much of that time, Dr Newell offered us a remarkable combination of qualities—he was highly intelligent, highly articulate, disabled, justifiably very angry—and, most remarkably of all, sometimes listened to.

In May 2002, he wrote: “(T)he situation of Australians with disability constitutes an apartheid that knows no name.”

Dr Newell said the separateness deliberately created by our society for people with a disability made a strong case for using the term “disability apartheid”.

“Australians with disability have special accommodation, special transport, special access, special everything.

“(S)o much of the tragedy in disability is created by a society that needlessly handicaps us.”

## CRUEL COUNTERFEIT CARING

In 2008, very little has improved. Carers of people with a disability received long overdue recognition under the Howard-Costello Government but, in many ways, the tone of much carer advocacy only deepens the community’s view of people with a disability as “unrelieved burden”.

In fact, in most areas, governmental attitudes - by loudly promising much and giving the wider community the idea that things are happening and yet delivering very little - have made the situation much worse.

I was struck earlier this year by the cruelty of counterfeit caring by Government when I read a Disability Services Queensland (DSQ) article trumpeting the success of a placement into their own “home” of some young people with a disability.

The first “counterfeit” was the idea that this was the young people’s “home” because the article also interviewed the service provider organisation about the negotiations necessary for staff in this “work site”.

I don’t know about you but I don’t see my views about my home and the views of paid staff about their “work site” in my home as having equal status. And, if they do, it’s not my home; it’s just somewhere I live.

The second “counterfeit” was that I knew the story was, at the time of publication, largely untrue. The young people were very dissatisfied with many of the constraints and requirements placed on them by DSQ and the service provider. They weren’t being abused or neglected, but they couldn’t live their life in the way they wanted to in their “home”.

## CRISIS OF ADVOCACY

The third “counterfeit” was that I knew this because they had no formal avenue of complaint, except to the instigator of the dissatisfaction, DSQ. There is virtually no government funding for individual advocacy organisations in Queensland who might have helped the young people to negotiate better recognition of their needs.

The few advocacy organisations that exist cannot hope to meet the need so don’t bother applying unless you’re homeless, being beaten, starved or seriously sexually abused, preferably all four.

Funding for one new organisation at Logan as announced by Parliamentary Secretary, Bill Shorten, won’t change this.

The saddest aspect of this magazine story is that it describes “the best” that can be expected by Australians with a disability. Most people with a disability are denied the right to an “ordinary life” every day of the week. The disabled are supposed to be satisfied with lives that provide shelter and food but not much else; lives that people without a disability would not be prepared to accept.

Occasionally individual stories of gross neglect and abuse make it into the mainstream media, but the ongoing neglect doesn’t.

That sounds like disability apartheid to me.

In 2006, the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners noted that there were about 300,000 people with intellectual disabilities in Australia. The RACGP pointed out that this was a similar proportion of the population as indigenous people “with health outcomes at least as bad”.

The Howard Government introduced Medicare funded annual health assessments for people with intellectual disabilities but nothing more has happened.

There is no ‘Closing the Gap’ program for this sector of our community.

That sounds like disability apartheid to me.

The Rudd Government has developed a reputation for consulting, not acting; but even in the consulting game, sections of the disability community are routinely being ignored and marginalised.

In May this year, the Rudd Government established the

National Social Inclusion Board, designed to assist in bringing the most socially disadvantaged Australians into the mainstream—the homeless, the unemployed, the disabled etc. The Board is comprised of very eminent and worthy Australians, many of whom have years of experience in the corporate charity sector. Unfortunately it has no members who are unemployed, homeless or disabled.

That sounds like disability apartheid to me.

In May this year, the Rudd Government established the National Council for the Elimination of Violence against Women. As Women with Disabilities Australia (WWDA) pointed out at the time, no woman with a disability was appointed to the council, yet women with disabilities experience more high-level violence more frequently than any other group.

That sounds like disability apartheid to me.

In September, the Rudd Government established the National People with Disabilities and Carers Council with “a major role in the development and monitoring of the (planned) National Disability Strategy”.

But as the peak National Council on Intellectual Disability (NCID) has now urgently pointed out the new body does not include any people with intellectual disability or any family representatives of people with high support needs.

The NCID states:

*“Individuals (with an intellectual disability and with high support needs) and their families continually fight against low expectations and against efforts to separate them from their community; in schooling, employment and housing.*

*“Having a commitment to all people with disability goes beyond*

*rhetoric: it is demonstrated in both small and large actions.*

*“For people with intellectual disability and families of people with high support needs, there is no point in the Rudd Government having a social inclusion policy if the very Council that is being charged with developing and monitoring this policy for people with disability specifically excludes them.*

*“This says very loudly that social inclusion is only for those who can ‘communicate and be like us’. It says that those who are too different are not included!”*

That doesn't just sound like disability apartheid; it is disability apartheid.

#### **FAILED STATE DELIVERY**

Now, through the COAG process, the Rudd Government is working to turn all services for people with disabilities under 65 over to the State Governments—“to the failed state and territory managed disability service system”, as the National Carers Coalition puts it.

No doubt the Federal Labor Government will bribe the States into acceptance as it has done in other policy areas but, on past performance, people with a disability and their families are very frightened. They have no faith in the ability of States to deliver and not to misuse the funding.

These are the same States that have been quietly building small institutions and are now emboldened to build or reopen bigger institutions in the misguided belief that they will all somehow be “better” this time around.

The Carers Coalition worries about “dirty deals done behind closed doors” at COAG.

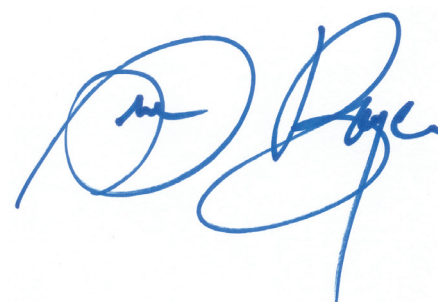
“We are witnessing the entrenchment of national disability discrimination based on age.”

This also is disability apartheid.

In 2002, Dr Newell thought that disability as apartheid was a shocking concept, yet, in his view, easy to overcome.

Thoughtful government programs and, especially, a willingness on the part of the Australian community to actively embrace difference would suffice.

Australia's disability community is still waiting.



*Senator Sue Boyce was elected by the Queensland Parliament on April 19, 2007, to fill a casual Senate vacancy, and then elected in her own right at the Federal election on November 24, 2008. She is Deputy Chair of the Joint Parliamentary Committee on Australian Crime Commission and a member of the Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs.*

*Sue is a disability advocate and a past president of the Down Syndrome Association of Queensland (DSAQ), and of Lifeways Inc., a Queensland organisation designed to assist ageing parents to plan for the long-term future of their adult child with a disability. She remains on the management committee of Lifeways.*